A Cthulhu Armageddon Novel

THE TOWER OF ZHAAL

C.T. PHIPPS

THE TOWER OF ZHAAL

Cthulhu Armageddon, Vol. 2

By C. T. Phipps

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C.T. Phipps is a lifelong student of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. An avid tabletop gamer, he discovered this passion led him to write and turned him into a lifelong geek. He is a regular blogger and also a reviewer for The Bookie Monster.

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Foreword

The Magnificent Seven versus Cthulhu. That was perhaps the best or worst idea for a book I'd had in years. It was, of course, one of the many ideas I'd pondered while thinking about whether I should write a sequel to *Cthulhu Armageddon*. Response was excellent to that not-so-eldritch tome about a cursed soldier and his companions versus the cosmic horrors of a post-apocalypse world. The question was whether I should write a sequel.

The best Lovecraftian fiction, except for maybe Titus Crow's adventures, has all been standalone material. This is because most protagonists go insane, die, or become unimaginable horrors who are in no position to continue their journey down the Chthonian hole to the Nameless City.

Then I realized that Jessica, John, and Mercury's story wasn't quite done yet.

I also needed Cthulhu to show up.

When I last left them, John had just learned that he had something unmentionable in his lineage that was destined to turn him into a monster, Mercury had discovered a talent for witchcraft, and Jessica was trapped in a dream from which she might never wake up. It was suitable as a downer ending, but I wanted to know what happened next, and since I, the author, was interested, I decided I might as well share it with you. I ended up sketching out a veritable cornucopia of ideas related to the post-apocalypse mythos Weird West. I also wanted to write about those other anti-heroes and protagonists the world might have produced. As for Cthulhu showing up, that was more a specialized preference of mine. Old Bat Wings was a presence in *Cthulhu Armageddon* but never actually made an appearance. Instead, like Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, he just loomed as a figure symbolizing everything that had gone wrong on Earth.

Screw that.

I admit, part of my desire for the Dreamer in R'lyeh to show up spawned from the archetypal tabletop *Call of Cthulhu* campaign. *In*

the Shadows of Yog-Sothoth, *The Masks of Nyarlathotep*, and a few others, preventing the rise of a Lovecraftian horror is the goal of the protagonists. It's a classic task that has been duplicated by the Ghostbusters, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and the Justice League. I wanted to give that sort of quest to my characters and see how they dealt with it since H.P. Lovecraft himself had penned it as the basis for *The Dunwich Horror* (ironically, NOT, the literary *Call of Cthulhu*).

There was just one small problem. In the world of *Cthulhu Armageddon*, the Great Old Ones are already awake. That was sort of the premise of my world, that they'd gotten free and wrecked the place. What was my hypothetical Great Old One going to do? Burn the ashes? Knock over what few ruined skyscrapers remained?

But what if the cultists had a different reason for wanting to awaken the last of the sleeping Great Old Ones? What if that reason was a good one? To find out what that is, I give you *The Tower of Zhaal*. Cthulhu will show up in it.

Just don't expect him on the first page.

Chapter One

The stars were not right. This fact was burned into the minds of every human being living on the ruin we called planet Earth. Once, the stars were white pinpricks of light against a black sky. They were comforting guides to astronomers, lovers, and sailors. The little dots of light hinted at vistas that humanity might one day visit. Those are not the stars of tonight's world. The stars I'd grown up with, which hung above me this evening, were red, orange, and yellow burning orbs that pulsated and hummed with eldritch energies. Sometimes the night sky was black, other times white, and others still colors not meant for human eyes.

Billions of years ago, the alien gods known as the Great Old Ones descended from the sky to claim our still primordial world as their own. Entering an epoch-long hibernation, they and their servant races slept as the world evolved around them. A dozen sentient races lived, and went extinct before the rise of humanity. In the Twenty-First century, the Great Old Ones had reclaimed the Earth and humanity was reduced to small tribes, scattered towns, and bandit gangs.

It was like the Old West Reborn, though I supposed it was a New East given we lived in the ruins of Massachusetts. Every year, it seemed humanity drifted closer and closer to extinction with no end in sight. The stars were the most visible sign of the Great Old Ones' presence, altering the very fabric of the universe with as causal a thing as a thought. Was it possible to survive in such a place where light, which should not have reached our world from distant solar systems for millions of years, now changed every second? I couldn't say. It was a heavy set of thoughts for a caravan guard.

"Booth?" a voice called at my side. I stared up into the endless void above me. We were lying on rocky Earth in dusty plains far to the north of the city we called our home.

"Yes, Mercury?"

Mercury Halsey was one of my few remaining comforts. A short flame-haired woman of mixed Japanese and Caucasian descent,

she had a thin, angular face with skin just recently weather-beaten from the sun. Mercury was not the sort of person one expected to survive in the harshness of the Wasteland. Appearances could be deceiving, though, and in Mercury's case she was silk hiding steel.

Though she looked like either a merchant or scholar, Mercury was the former chief torturer for the recently overthrown New Arkham government. As a scientist, she'd been made to use her knowledge of healing to torment instead. In the end, she'd revolted and fled with me into the Wasteland. We'd been traveling together for almost a year and had become lovers—a development expected by everyone but me.

Mercury lay on a sleep roll beside me, her small body tucked under the blankets. I took a moment to admire it and wish we weren't currently celibate thanks to my "condition." Behind us, there were beaten-down carts and composite cars made from a hundred different vehicles being used to haul freight and drive cattle from Kingsport to New Arkham.

Creatures the locals called horses, but were a wide variety of strange mutated animals of a quad or hexahedral nature, also rode as part of the caravan. Dozens of humans were asleep or standing watch around us, a mixture of workers and guards like myself. Mercury was the caravan's medic. The two of us had been intent on changing the world, but we'd somehow ended up becoming traders instead.

"What are you thinking about?" Mercury asked. Though we were resting, she wore rough denim and goggles around her neck. Given the potential dangers of the Wasteland, we had to sleep lightly and wake instantly, ready for action at any given moment.

"The stars," I admitted.

Mercury looked up. "Yeah, I suppose they are pretty tonight."

I snorted. If there was one survival advantage evolution had granted humanity over the many Extra Biological Entities (or E.B.E.s, as the Remnant used to call them), it was the ability to normalize the inexplicable. Six-and-a-half billion humans had died in the Rising and the survivors had learned to share their world with all manner of strange creatures—many of which had lived beside us all along.

The surviving humans still hated the Deep Ones, ghouls, mutants, and Serpent Men of the world, but their existence no longer drove an otherwise rational man to madness. Even now, a century later, we were still scraping by with all the divisions that had existed before. The members of the Morgan Trading Company were more afraid of Dunwych tribals or human raiders than they were of monsters robbing them.

"The stars *are* beautiful," I admitted, smiling. "I've been looking at them for hours."

"Can't sleep?"

"I don't sleep much anymore. Sometimes I go for weeks at a time without rest." I was speaking literally.

"Don't let the others hear that," Mercury whispered, looking over at my right arm. "They might take it the wrong way."

"I'll bear that in mind."

I flexed my right hand, feeling the immense, terrible power within it. It was bound in bandages and cloth wrappings, long sleeves as well as gloves hiding its true nature. Arcane glyphs from the *Necronomicon* and *Book of Eibon* had been branded into my flesh while juju beads bought from Dunwych mystics were spun around the hideous black chitin that covered everything from my fingertips to my arm socket. On my right shoulder, spreading alien poison through my veins, was the Hand of Nyarlathotep. It was a scar in the shape of a human hand that often glowed with an ethereal white light.

The Hand of Nyarlathotep was a symbol of being "touched" by one of the Other Gods. I had only suspicions as to how I'd acquired it, but it now defined my life. Once, I thought the strange marking had been killing me, but time had revealed it portended a more insidious fate. I was becoming something other than human.

A stronger man would have taken his own life by now, but years of serving as a soldier had left me with a tenacious desire to live. The runes and beads kept the infection at bay, albeit poorly, and I'd gotten to live a few more months with my lover. Mercury could turn her attention away from the horror within me and love me regardless. Even so, she'd terminated her pregnancy last month lest she gave birth to a monster.

“How are the spells holding up?” Mercury asked, her voice uneasy.

“Not well,” I answered, more frustrated than scared now. “They slowed its progress in the beginning but I’m not sure they’re doing anything now.”

“We could try amputating it again.”

“No.”

“John—”

“It isn’t a matter of me not wanting to be a cripple. I tried cutting off my arm with the help of a tribal warrior during the trip through the Bloch Passage, but I awoke days later covered in blood and no idea how I got there. My arm had regrown and the amount of mutated flesh had doubled.” I didn’t tell Mercury that I’d awoken with blood in my mouth and a full stomach.

“I wondered what happened on that trip,” Mercury said, reaching over to place her hand on my shoulder. “I can judge the current rate of progression and give you a rough estimate if you want but—”

“How long do I have?”

Mercury touched my right and I shifted from her. Not only because it was my cursed one but also because of how her touch felt. It was electric and excited the dark alien parts of my brain that wanted to make her my mate in a way antithetical to human love.

“You have perhaps another two or three months until the change reaches your heart.” Mercury’s expertise with E.B.E.s and mutation had allowed me to get an accurate measurement of my condition. “After that, I don’t think it will stop. It will accelerate and consume your entire body. From there, you will no longer be John Henry Booth. You will be—”

“What?” I asked, daring her to say *monster*.

“I don’t know.” Mercury looked away.

I didn’t want to encourage her to try and cheer me up about my condition. There was too much scientist in her still. I felt like a specimen under her microscope some nights, a creature that might survive the end days yet carry some spark of humanity. Despite this, I loved her and tolerated her eccentricities. After all, Mercury was

one of the few people I trusted enough to share my torn feelings with —just not all of them.

There was a part of me that I kept from her, a part of me, a repressed and hidden part that *wanted* to be changed. While I no longer slept much, I still *dreamed*. *Azathoth*, *Azathoth*, *Azathoth.* The relentless repeating of the Blind Idiot God's name was a constant in the back of my mind now. Outside the ordered universe was an amorphous blight of nethermost confusion that blasphemed and bubbled at the center of all infinity.

Surrounding it was a court of nameless otherworldly priests, bards, and courtiers of descriptions that defied conventional reason. Their hideous chanting paid homage to the End of Everything and called to me to join them in an eternal dance of nightmarish joy. I *wanted* to join their revelry. To be free of this dead, dusty world of causal violence and hopeless nights so I could stop caring that every day seemed to bring us closer to oblivion.

But then I wouldn't love Mercury. I wouldn't love anything at all. Not my daughters, my son, or my squad mates living and dead.

Monsters didn't love.

Only humans did.

"So what are we going to do?" Mercury asked, perhaps sensing my increasing ambivalence. There were times I'd seen her stand over me, thinking I was asleep, perhaps contemplating ending my life as a form of mercy. Her hesitation made me happy, but I wasn't sure if it was the right emotion to feel.

"I don't know," I said, taking a deep breath.

"We need to make a final decision before the decision is made for us. Assuming we haven't made the decision already by waiting this long."

"I *know*," I said, the bitterness in my voice harsh and thick.

I looked over to the other caravan crew to make sure no one was listening. Those who weren't asleep weren't close enough to hear, a fact I found relieving. Mercury hadn't been exaggerating about the mutant burnings. I'd seen hundreds of them killed over my four decades of life, mostly at my hands.

Was the alien blood in my veins polluting my mind? Were the visions warping my will? Would a rational, uncorrupted John Henry Booth have hesitated to kill himself if it meant saving the world from one more predator? I just didn't know anymore.

"Will you remember me if you change?" Mercury asked. "Us? Anything?"

"Nothing could make me forget you," I lied to her.

"I *can't* kill you." Mercury's blue eyes blinked in the darkness. "I've wanted to at times, even prepared the instruments, but I can't. I'm as addicted to you as you are to me."

It would have been a shocking revelation coming from anyone but her. Mercury had planned for killing every member of this caravan, should they turn on us, when we'd taken this job—and all our previous employers. It was a quality I liked about her. I'd already lost friends to my impending metamorphosis. Jessica O'Reilly, a woman I'd grown up with, had turned on me and tried to kill me. I still found myself wondering if she hadn't been the sane one among us some nights.

"Thank you," I said, looking down at the dusty ground beneath my bedroll. "I mean that."

"I want you to live, no matter the cost. One more monster won't make this world any worse. Maybe you'll be able to remember it when everything else is dead."

The bitterness in Mercury's voice surprised me. It shouldn't have. Mercury wasn't just speaking grim cynicism, but prophecy. Nyarlathotep, the Messenger of the Other Gods and the inspiration for countless divinities, had spoken to me of humanity's fate.

Three generations.

I did not know if he meant the accumulated lifespans of three humans or sixty years, but he had been clear in the rest of his statement's meaning. Humanity, that weak race of primates I could no longer call my own, was doomed. Extinction would claim our race after Nyarlathotep's ambiguous deadline passed and no force in the universe would stop it. I had sworn myself against this destiny, proclaimed I could stop mankind's destruction, but that had been

hubris. How could I save humanity when I couldn't even save myself?

I reached over to grasp Mercury's hand with my left one. Our fingers touched. "No one knows how long we have on this world. I might be cursed to something horrible in a few months or I might die tomorrow. The condition could reverse itself as well. Where there is life, there is hope."

Even if it was a fool's hope.

"Damn, you're a bundle of joy tonight."

"I thought I was being cheerful, actually." I gave a half-smirk.

Mercury abruptly changed subjects, still squeezing my hand. "Do you think Jackie will be all right while we're on this trip?"

Mercury was speaking of her our adopted daughter, Jackie Howard. Jackie was living under a curse every bit as dreadful as my own, possessing the hybridized blood of human and ghoul. Like my dear lost friend, Richard Jameson, Jackie would undergo a terrible transformation when she reached her thirties and cease to be as she was. The ghouls were not an evil race, their love of human flesh aside, but she would be forever ostracized from humanity thereafter.

"We left her in a city of murderers, pimps, and slavers—she'll be fine," I said, smiling.

Mercury snorted. "Not funny, Booth." She was smiling, though.

I wasn't joking. Kingsport was a town of criminals—it was also the only civilization I trusted not to kill Jackie out of hand should her true parentage become known.

"Mister Death has promised to look after her. The Dunwych tribesmen do not think of the E.B.E.s the same way we do. They think Jackie's blood makes her strong."

I did not trust the tribal shaman as far as I could throw him, but I did not believe he would betray our trust. I'd saved his people last year, as much through luck as anything, and he owed me.

"I just worry about her. Jackie's the one good thing that has come out of the past year, our relationship aside."

"Jackie is, indeed. We had to come out here, though." One could not survive long in the Wasteland if one didn't have a useful skill to trade for food and water. To feed our non-traditional family around

me, Mercury and I both needed to work, and caravanning was the only thing that allowed enough payment for research into a cure as well as comfortable living.

Well, that and banditry. I wasn't about to turn desert pirate, though.

"We will be home soon," I reassured her. "You can continue to teach Jackie all the skills she needs to be a doctor or medic."

"Fat lot of good they'll do her in Ghoultown."

I snorted. "Who knows, maybe they'll find it amusing to learn about what humans called their bones."

"Versus supper?" Mercury said, making an unfunny joke.

I laughed anyway. "Yeah."

"I love you, Booth."

"I love you, too."

I leaned over to kiss her and as our lips met, I felt a dreadful pain in my chest. Pulling away, I placed my hand over my heart and felt it beat several times faster than normal. Looking up, I stared into the darkness and *saw*.

In a spectrum denied the three dimensions afforded to humanity, I saw past the dusty plains we were camped on to a group coming at us. A very large group. Dozens of gray-robed figures, each holding rods of crystal, were approaching in an eerie octagonal formation.

Some were men and women.

Humans.

Others were not.

"Mercury, awaken the camp," I said, sucking in my breath.

"Alarm!" Mercury shouted at the top of her lungs, running around the camp and waking up the guards who weren't already on watch. "We're under attack!"

Chapter Two

Cultists. There was one scourge greater than any other across the Wastelands, and that was those humans who'd chosen to devote themselves to the Great Old Ones. Not because they were more dangerous than the monsters around us, but because they focused their rage squarely on humanity. Not all the Great Old Ones' worshipers were evil. The Dunwych, for example, walked the balance between fear and awe with practiced ease. Cultists mistook the Great Old One's indifference to the Old World's destruction as deliberate malice and attempted to curry favor by slaughtering their fellow man.

Now we were surrounded by them.

I did not know this group to be cultists because of their attire—robes were just practical desert wear, after all—but by the crystal rods in their hands. I'd last seen them wielded by the Elder Things on a trip to the Dreamlands—a dimension even more chaotic than our own. The weapons could deliver terrible electrical shocks and perform all manner of other, seemingly mystical, feats. No human could acquire them on their own. They had to have been given to madmen.

Our caravan wasn't composed of fools. They went for their weapons and defensible positions. Everyone in the camp was armed and had ammunition to spare. Even a century later, it wasn't difficult to find guns in the former United States—not that regular bullets did much against monsters. Hopefully, we'd get in some lucky shots.

On my end, I went for my A19 rifle. It was one of many composite weapons the United States Remnant had constructed in the aftermath of the Rising. A combination of a sniper rifle and an assault weapon, it had seen better days. Still, it was a weapon I knew well and had been trained in the use of. Furthermore, I had a secret weapon—a clip of orihalcum ammunition I'd managed to recover from the wreckage of a crashed Remnant helicopter. Made from a Deep One's metal harvested from the bottom of the ocean floor, orihalcum could kill the unkillable.

Sometimes.

Lifting the weapon's crude half-functioning night scope, I gazed out into the darkness. The robed figures were a few dozen yards away now, having somehow traveled farther in the short time than they could have walked (or run). The one at the head of the group, a tall brown-skinned man wearing slightly more ornate robes than the rest, lifted a crystal rod as if to signal the others to do the same.

Snapping a cartridge clip into the chamber, I wasn't fast enough to fire before the air filled with glowing bolts of light. The bright beams arched through the darkness like mortars before landing on our campsite. Explosions knocked over and killed many of the workers around me, igniting our cargo. The fire burned unnaturally fast, leaving a near-instant ruin of char in its place. Some of the guards I'd befriended—Davidson, Bone-Face, and Hillary—were already dead. I intended to avenge them.

It was Mercury who scored the first kill as she raised a pistol and fired repeatedly into the night. I saw one of her bullets strike a cultist in the chest and send him spiraling to the ground. I switched to automatic fire, gunning down another figure with tentacles for a mouth before switching to a second, and a third. The air filled with staccato bursts. My ears stung, but I ignored the pain, concentrating on taking down as many attackers as possible.

Unfortunately, the battle was lost before it began. More energy bolts sailed our way, adding to the slaughter. I saw a woman, Mavis, fall to the ground with her entire chest burned out like it was kindling. Her eyes stared into the star-filled sky, the orbs glazed over with a primordial terror.

The cultists continued to advance. Their weapons could tear us apart from a distance, but they chose to move closer, enjoying the slaughter. More of the robed figures dropped as the five or six of us remaining relocated behind cover to retaliate. As advanced as their technology was, the cultists weren't bullet proof, and more of them died every step they took. The problem was, their steps were not normal. Somehow, they were warping space and time, not running, or taking long strides, but seeming to flash ahead, every foot they moved seeming more like a yard.

I kept firing. The cultists ignored the bloody bodies they left behind, proceeding as if not assaulted by a hail of gunfire. Only the brown-skinned man in the lead reacted differently. I targeted his head with my rifle and pulled the trigger. He showed no response at all—it was as if my bullet had passed through him.

“Fuck,” I muttered, focusing on the other cultists, who seemed more vulnerable to my attacks. They were less than thirty feet away now and their numbers had halved, but they still outnumbered us. They probably could have killed us, and I wondered if they planned to drag us back for some sort of ceremony. If so, I vowed to save the last bullet in my gun for myself.

“They’re not slowing down, Booth,” Mercury shouted, scoring her seventh kill. She was having more luck than I was. I noticed that several of the bodies I’d gunned down earlier were getting back up.

“No shit,” I muttered, before shouting, “We need to fall back!”

The other surviving guards didn’t get a chance to respond, as less than ten feet away, the cultists aimed their crystalline weapons and obliterated them. So much for not killing us. Their bodies didn’t get blasted apart as Mavis’s had, but were burned with such heat that they seemed to melt where they stood. Soon, only Mercury and I were left.

“Fuck!” I swore again, this time running backwards as I fired. Mercury did as well. All of the corpses on the ground we’d shot to pieces had risen. I decided to switch to my orihalcum clip but wasn’t sure those would do any good either. How did you fight an opponent who wouldn’t stay dead?

“What was that about us heading back to Kingsport after this?” Mercury baited me. “Funny, I seem to recall the word ‘easy’ for this mission.”

“Not the time!”

The two of us maneuvered through the burning wreckage of the carts and composite cars, firing at the cultists as we went. They were forming a circle around the camp. My head started to ache as I heard the chanting of Azathoth’s name in the back of my head change. No longer was it the sound of his distant court, but instead,

seemed far closer and in an eerie language that was not meant to be spoken by a human tongue.

“F’gnarrgaa haaa’ra abagarnaaa cathaaal Yith. F’gnarrgaa haaa’ra abagarnaaa cathaaal Yith. F’gnarrgaa haaa’ra abagarnaaa cathaaal Yith.”

Taking yet another shot, I grimaced, feeling like my head was about to explode. I understood that language. It spoke to memories locked in the fabric of my DNA, or perhaps some spiritual link my consciousness had to the greater universe. Moreover, I knew the word Yith.

Spoken of in *Unknown Kults*, they were an ancient race which had once inhabited the Earth during the Cretaceous Period. Advanced yet peaceful, they psychically sailed the oceans of time and space, learning about other worlds by seizing the bodies of lesser creatures. They had lived among the dinosaurs before the latter’s extinction and occasionally popped up to record humanity’s dying days in the present. Did the cultists worship the Yithians, or had they simply adapted the word to their use with no understanding of what it meant?

Reaching the end of my clip, I bumped into Mercury as we slipped behind the one composite car undamaged by the cultists’ hellish bolts. A former school bus, the vehicle had carried the largest portion of cargo in the caravan—foodstuffs like grain, rice, and fruits for the people of Arkham. The other goods had been destroyed out of hand, but the cultists had left this one alone. Was it simple robbery? Were they just cattle rustlers and horse thieves? The lives of dozens sacrificed for the price of a few crates and animals? Perhaps. I’d seen people killed for much less.

Behind us, the inferno of three carts that had been pulled by a now-half-melted truck hid us from the cultists now encircling our campsite. I had no doubt they knew where we were, though, and that they could kill us at any time. Indeed, it was strange they hadn’t done so already. They had killed everyone else without hesitation. We were being kept alive for some reason.

Why?

Mercury turned to me, sweat covering her brow, her eyes reflecting the flames around us. The heat was tremendous and it was difficult to breathe. For all the horrible changes I'd undergone, I still needed to breathe, and we'd run out of the battlefield into what was close to a raging inferno. Still, I saw no hopelessness or terror in her face.

Only anger.

"If you have any ideas, now would be a good time to share them." Mercury's voice was choked, but I knew she'd rather go down fighting than become a cultist's pet.

So would I.

I lifted up my ammo clip of orihalcum bullets and switched it out for the one in my A19. "Perhaps these will make a difference."

"Ia Cthulhu, motherfuckers!" a voice spoke from the doorway of the bus beside us as the drunken figure of Rodriguez Castro stumbled out.

I did a double-take, seeing the wizened old man. Rodriguez was seventy years old if he was a day, but the white-bearded, hunched-over figure seemed more defiant than either of us.

Wearing a brown vest, linen pants, and a moonshine-stained shirt, he was carrying a small carved stone figurine and a revolver. I had not spoken to the man much, but my brief experience with him told me he was a lunatic who'd survived more terrors in the Wasteland than perhaps anyone else in Kingsport.

"Stay in the bus!" Mercury shouted, stunned by his appearance.

"I choose this!" Rodriguez shouted, waddling over to nearest flaming wreck and tossing the stone figure into it. "Die and burn!"

Then he shot himself in the head, And the ground started shaking.

"That was unexpected," Mercury muttered, blinking rapidly.

I couldn't quite believe what I'd seen. "Yeah."

Mercury tugged on my sleeve. The psychic repetition in my head dissolved as I heard rapid discussion in a variety of languages ranging from the alien tongue I'd heard earlier to English. The last voice spoke words of panic and warning, and very suddenly, a sense of terror from our attackers. Whatever their mysterious plan, they had not counted on dealing with what we were now faced with.

A summoning.

Summonings were just one of the black arts mankind had turned to in the wake of the Rising. Ancient and inscrutable creatures had taught us the secrets of drawing them to this dimension through the power of will alone—I suspected this was akin to ringing a dinner bell as far as they were concerned. Controlling such creatures was possible if one were a very powerful psychic or if you were the one who summoned them.

I was not a powerful psychic and Rodriguez was dead.

“I’m not sure which way to run,” I said, clutching my rifle.

The ground beneath us began to crack as the air charged with static electricity. The largest of the cracks expanded while Mercury and I backed away. Like a rift between worlds, the ground beneath us had become a portal to somewhere else.

Mercury sensibly looked away from the manifestation, but I stupidly gazed forward and saw the harrowing sight of an alien world beyond. Its skies were green and storming with metal raindrops while vast glowing clouds hung beneath the planetary rings. A horrendous sickly-green tendril, as luminescent as the clouds of its world, moved up through the portal and planted itself on the surface of our world.

On its native planet, the creature might have been an average or weak member of its species, but Earth was fantastically blessed for fostering weakness even in its present shattered state. Evolution had created life in places where gravity was hundreds of times worse and the air would sear the flesh of men like dry paper when tossed into a fire. Here, this creature would be all but indestructible.

Yet another god in a world ruled by them.

My apathy toward death dulled my reflexes and left me staring at the creature in admiration while it rose to its full height. The glowing-green creature was several long tentacles stretching from a single body that resembled a half-melted wax candle possessed of a single enormous maw. Hundreds of glowing orbs of blackish light were buried into the side of its rock-like carapace, and above its head there was a nimbus of colorless energy swirling around its central stalk.

Mercury, thankfully, wasn't as entranced by the monster's sudden appearance as I was. Grabbing my A19, she aimed the weapon and began firing into the surface of the horrible, yet majestic abomination before us. Black orbs and pockets of its flesh exploded from the orihalcum bullet strikes. The creature thrashed and hissed under the fire, feeling the sting of the mysterious metal.

"Yeah!" Mercury shouted, keeping her finger pressed on the trigger.

Right until the clip ran out.

"Fuck," Mercury hissed.

I pushed Mercury out of the way before she could do the same and found myself wrapped in the crushing vise of the alien monstrosity's tentacle. As the creature's carapace burned, its body heat felt like a hot iron pressed against my skin. It seared away my clothes where it touched, and with the slightest squeeze, it could have bisected my body like burning metal through cheese. The pain was immeasurable, erasing rational thought.

I cried out, the sound an incomprehensible roar. Inexplicably, I found my golden side-knife, a gift from my ex-wife Martha, in my right hand. A weapon of the Deep Ones, it was made of orihalcum and woven with spells far above those any human wizard could inscribe. Animal instinct took over and I jammed the weapon into the monster's tentacles.

While appearing to be made of gold, which would have made the blade malleable, the weapon sliced through the creature's carapace and I began carving it away to the flesh underneath. Orihalcum was a gold-like substance that tore other-dimensional creatures apart like fire and tinder. Black acidic ichor bubbled forth from the wound underneath, melting away my sleeve and revealing the chitin-covered black arm beneath.

I laughed insanely, stabbing my black arm deeper into the creature's tentacle and pulling out a yellow set of tubes. The creature let forth an ear-piercing multi-pitch wail from a dozen holes that opened across its central stalk. The tubes I held burst when I squeezed them, causing more of the black ichor to pour out onto my mutated hand.

The creature dropped me on the ground, thrashing its tentacles in every direction. Hideous burning scars raked across my chest, but I felt no pain. Were I a normal man, I'd have been dead or screaming in agony, but instead the sensation felt like a baroque echo of pain. I threw up a greenish black substance on the ground.

"Ib'in ack thuhl kargrba zach ign Cthulhu!" I heard Mercury mangle and spit out the guttural language of the Deep Ones. I recognized the spell she was casting, one of the many described in the ritual section of the *Necronomicon*.

"Mercury!" I shouted, calling for her to stop. The forces the spell harvested were enough to tear most human hosts apart. I'd seen hybrids of the Deep One, regular humans, and ghouls ripped to shreds for attempting to invoke Great Cthulhu's power.

Much to my surprise, the creature behind me stopped thrashing and began to sweat sulfurous ooze from dozens of holes across its body. The crack it had emerged from began to seal behind it and the creature attempted to flee through it, half of its vile body sinking back down into the alien world from which it had emerged.

"Ib'in ack thuhl kargrba zach ign Hastur!" Mercury screamed, raising her hands high in the air. "Ib'in ack thuhl kargrba zach ign Shub-Niggurath! KATHALL!"

The creature slipped into the last of the crack before it sealed over, disappearing from our world forever. I did not know if it feared the power of Cthulhu being channeled through Mercury's invocations, the equivalent of a rocket launcher held by mice, or whether it had been forced back into its realm by her will alone.

Either way, she'd saved us.

Rushing to her side, I reached for her with my inhuman clawed hand. Mercury shuddered away from it and I hid it behind my back. Lifting my human hand instead, I said, "You banished it."

"I did." Mercury coughed, clearly shaken. "Yay me. Now we just have to deal with a horde of rampaging cultists."

I looked over my shoulder and saw that all of the fires had gone out and we were surrounded by the dozens of gray-robed cultists who had left their circle to approach us. They'd done so silently. I hadn't picked up on them—which was impossible.

“Oh, ha ha,” Mercury said. “Very funny, gods I don’t believe in.”

The brown-skinned cultist from earlier stood at the front. He was close enough now that I could get a better look at his features. The man was tall, as tall as me, with a handsome face and short, dark hair. A pair of wire-frame spectacles sat on the bridge of his nose and there was intelligence behind his eyes.

There was also a sense of contempt, as if I was not worth his attention. Then again, from his perspective I was a mutant who’d just gotten into a fistfight with a creature from another world. Not exactly someone you wanted to invite to a dinner party. The figure had a crystal rod aimed at my chest.

The man spoke in a calm, soothing tone. “I am Professor Harvey Armitage. Mister Booth, Ms. Halsey, we need your help.”

Chapter Three

I shot the interlopers death with my eyes, wishing it was more than metaphor. “You could have just *asked*.”

“You might have said no,” Professor Armitage replied, looking between us. “Our matter is of the utmost urgency and could not be delayed, even for the slightest moment.”

“And that justifies killing thirty-six people?” Mercury said, gazing at the burning corpses around her.

Professor Armitage snorted. “Bandits, degenerates, outlaws, and smugglers. Miskatonic has long done business with Kingsport, but it is an unwelcome and unhappy thing. Either way, you will come with us.”

“Or you’ll kill us, too?” I said, putting my left arm around Mercury.

“Yes.”

Professor Armitage made a good argument for acquiescing—albeit one that did not incline me to help him further than necessary. I was about to respond when I doubled over in pain, all the agony from my wounds struck me as it would a regular human. The pain was searing and my body shuddered from the torture. Mercury was at my side in an instant, but there was nothing she could do.

“Hold still,” Professor Armitage said, pressing the rod against the burn mark on my stomach.

Agonizing pain of a different sort shot through my body, white-hot to the point of driving me mad. Then it was gone, as was the pain I’d felt just before Professor Armitage touched me.

I looked at where the creature had wrapped its burning tentacle around me and saw that my wound had vanished.

“How?” I asked, wondering not just what he’d done, but how he’d done it to a body so riddled with mutation. Could a man capable of healing my arm like that reverse my mutation?

“Science,” Professor Armitage said, lifting the crystal rod. “One so advanced and beyond that of our ancestors it would appear as magic to them. Just as the invocations to Cthulhu that your consort

made tapped into a ‘technology of the mind’ the Great Old Ones created and built into the fabric of the universe.”

“Technology of the mind?” I asked, perplexed.

Mercury seemed every bit as interested as I.

“I have studied under the Great Race of Yith for the better part of a century and have acquired only a drop of an ocean of knowledge,” Professor Armitage said, his look of contempt softening. The man looked no more than mid-thirties, at best, so his claim of antiquity surprised me, but not much. I’d seen far stranger things in my time traveling the Wasteland.

“How old are you?” Mercury asked.

“I was born the day of the Rising,” Professor Armitage said. “Given the chaos of that period, it is a miracle I survived at all.”

“What do you want from us?” Mercury said, running her fingertips over my burn mark and casting her gaze towards my right arm.

“That is best revealed at the University.”

“The University.” I repeated the name, wondering what he was referring to. No Old Earth institutions had survived the Rising. The Remnant had a semi-formal college, but it was alone in this.

Professor Armitage nodded. “The University is, to my knowledge, the last decent place of learning in the whole of humanity. There, we educate the next generation of humans in the knowledge of the poor dumb animals that proceeded us and what we might become.”

“Sounds like a cult,” Mercury said, showing her usual lack of restraint. “I’ve heard plenty of rhetoric like this before—usually before someone suggests I offer myself up to something that thinks I’ll taste delicious.”

Several of the robed figures looked less than pleased at her words.

Professor Armitage’s reaction, though, was to be amused. Smiling, he said, “Yes, I suppose that would be how it would appear to you. We do not worship the Great Race. I, myself, believe in no god but reason.”

“Reason is a poor god in this world,” Mercury muttered.

“You speak of Miskatonic,” I said, finally understanding who and what this group was.

“Yes,” Professor Armitage replied. “I’m glad you recognize us.”

When the Rising occurred, the citizens of Arkham, Massachusetts, fled to their local air force base for protection. The descendants of said place had gone on to found New Arkham. A small number, though, had gathered around Miskatonic University’s academics. Forming the Miskatonic settlement, they’d become a weird and exclusive band of scientists.

New Arkham had tried to annex it several times, but the citizens were elusive and dangerous. In the end, New Arkham had simply agreed to trade technology and supplies with them. Given their actions here today, it was perhaps a good thing we had not sought a closer alliance.

“All right, take us to this University,” I said, grunting through labored breaths. My insides felt like they were on fire. It wasn’t an entirely unpleasant feeling, though, more like I was breathing through new lungs and the oxygen was being carried down to a fresh set of organs.

Mercury looked at me and I felt a twinge of guilt for answering for us both. I didn’t know what other options we had, though. The Yithian cultists had proven immune to gunfire and made mincemeat out of our fellow soldiers. While they wanted us alive, I had no doubt they’d be able to kill us in seconds if they changed their minds.

And I wasn’t sure we’d be able to say no to their demands, even then.

“Follow me.” Professor Armitage beckoned us with his crystal rod in hand.

Reluctantly, I stood up and followed him. Mercury trailed behind, keeping her eyes on the cultists beside us and watching them until we passed out of a circle.

“How did you and your followers move so quickly?” I asked, looking at Professor Armitage. “Was it through technology, magic, or something else?”

“Space and time are relative,” Professor Armitage replied. “As that poor insane man was able to bend both to bring that creature here, so is it possible for those who perceive the world differently to do the same.”

“How—” I started to ask.

The three of us were no longer in the middle of the desert but in the middle of a large dusty courtyard. A faded, featureless statue of an aged scholar stood in the center of it and old, dilapidated buildings formed a square around us. There was no plant life, just cracked dead earth, with a terrible sense of *wrongness*. It was the feeling I got when I walked through a graveyard at night as if I was being watched by a thousand dead things peering out from their abandoned tombs.

The sun was rising and it looked like several hours had passed. Over the doors of one of the buildings, larger than most I’d seen outside of cities, was the name “Miskatnic” with the “o” missing between the “t” and the “n.” No one was around the campus. For a supposed vast center of learning, it appeared like much of the rest of the Wasteland—a remnant of a society that had once been grand but was now reduced to nothing more than echoes. The only thing out of place was a loud humming noise I heard in the back of my mind, coming from every direction at once.

“—so?” I finished.

“OK, that was a neat trick,” Mercury said, looking around. She was trying to hide how uncomfortable she was with snark. “I will say, though, your university has seen better days.”

“Yes, where are all the citizens?” I asked, looking for the source of the noise.

“Underground.” Professor Armitage made a slight gesture of his head. “The steam tunnels from the Pre-Rising wars are a far more formidable refuge for the world’s last bastion of knowledge than these poor irradiated buildings.”

Ah, of course. No wonder New Arkham had failed to take this place. “Will my—”

I stopped when I saw my hideous black appendage. The spider-like chitin was now merged with a carapace similar to that of the creature I’d just killed, as dark as midnight and looking like organic tank armor. The ends of my fingertips were clawed but seemed sharper now, and I felt like there was a new sort of blood running

through my veins. Even more shocking, it hurt to look at my arm now, as if it no longer entirely existed in three dimensions.

I shuddered and forced it behind me.

I felt sick.

The change was getting worse.

“Condition?” Professor Armitage asked, looking amused at my reaction to my arm.

“Yes, my *condition*.” I gritted my teeth at his description. “Will it be a problem?”

“I think not,” Professor Armitage said. “The University takes all kinds. Those who are not open to *alternative forms of life* are the only ones who are not welcome. It takes a steady mind and strong will to study here.”

“Can you help him?” Mercury looked at Professor Armitage with pleading eyes. I’d not seen her give those to anyone, not even when the Marshes had kidnapped her.

“Is something wrong with him?” Professor Armitage asked, raising an eyebrow. He turned and started walking to the side of a building to our east.

“What an asshole,” Mercury said, watching him depart.

“Mercury, don’t irritate the teleporting wizard.”

“He’s not …” Mercury paused. “OK, he’s a wizard, but we’ve killed those before.”

I flexed my right hand behind my back, feeling the immense power within. I had an urge to rip off my own flesh and reveal the creature beneath. “You saw what he did. He might be able to help me, even if he doesn’t seem too keen on it. Plus, I’d rather not be thrown out into space or into the middle of a rock.”

“He *murdered* all those people.” Mercury’s voice was a low hiss.

“We’re *all* murderers here.”

Mercury was silent to that accusation, looking at the ground. “At least we know you’re still human, Booth. No other race could produce such a dick.”

I tried to ignore my shame at not going after Armitage. Once, I had been willing to cross the entirety of the Wasteland to hunt down and kill a man for hurting those I cared about. Killing Doctor Alan

Ward hadn't brought me any peace, though—quite the opposite. Instead, I found myself mourning my dead friends while caring little that their murderer was still walking around. It was another sign of my dwindling humanity, and I couldn't blame Mercury for being disgusted by it.

I tore off the remains of my shirt and wrapped it around my right arm. It was a poor cover-up and added to the horror in a way, as if something terrible and unnatural were hidden by the most paper-thin disguise. Mercury did her best to look away, but I saw the disgust in her eyes. The revulsion. A part of me was furious with her for that look. It made me want to—

Kill them all.

I shook my head, shaking away that errant thought. Violent imagery was becoming increasingly a part of my daily life. I'd always lived with one hand dipped in blood, but when I killed now, there was something different.

Something glorious.

"Booth?"

I blinked and started walking toward Professor Armitage. I needed to get some fresh air and stop thinking about everything.

You are a god among men.

Feed.

As I quickened my pace, the voices in the back of my head receded to a loud hum. Soon, I arrived at a set of concrete steps leading down to an innocuous metal door built into the side of some sort of bunker.

There was a keypad to the side of it, looking like the same broken technology you might find everywhere in the Wasteland. Professor Armitage, however, entered an eight-digit code consisting entirely of the number four.

"Someone was lazy in making their code," I said, giving a fake half-smile.

"Some numbers have significance."

The door creaked open with a hiss and icy cold air washed across my body, causing me to shiver. Mercury followed, and looked past me into the long corridors behind the metal door.

“Forgive the cold,” Professor Armitage said. “Some of our most important members are preserved here through methods less effective than my own immortality.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, uninterested in his allusions.

The three of us stepped into the ice-cold confines of the University’s tunnels illuminated by fluorescent lights. The air flickered and a dozen or more gray-robed figures appeared out of nowhere around us. Just looking at them caused me to feel sick. The rest of Professor Armitage’s group had arrived.

“Follow me,” Professor Armitage said, advancing past them. “I will answer whatever questions are not better covered by speaking to the Great One.”

“The Great One?” I asked, wondering if he was a human with delusions of grandeur or something worse.

“A title of respect,” Professor Armitage said. “They are the architect of our triumph.”

“They?” The word choice was curious.

Professor Armitage didn’t answer, looking back with an enigmatic smile. “You will see what I mean.”

Well, that wasn’t ominous.

The three of us passed by numerous open doorways, ones that revealed sights that both intrigued and disturbed. There were classrooms where children of all ages were listening to lectures on a variety of subjects.

They were not all human, including children of ghoul and Deep One ancestry, plus several obvious mutants. It was to my shame and regret my initial reaction to this sight was to be disgusted as well as fearful for the children’s safety. It seemed I was not so far from my New Arkham roots as I realized.

“How many people do you have here?” Mercury asked, distracting me from my ponderings.

“Several thousand,” Professor Armitage said, passing by a pair of human scholars holding piles of books. “We draw from the population of Miskatonic’s outlying communities for most of our new recruits, but our own descendants work here as well. Our facilities

are small but self-sufficient. We are not so in need of population growth as other outposts."

"Population is the least thing to concern oneself with when the world is dying and we can't feed the humans we have."

I wondered what other surprises awaited us.

"It seems to be a very interesting place," Mercury said, looking into a room where corpses were being autopsied and some sort of lecture was going on about the human body.

"You might find the research here to be to your liking, Doctor Halsey," Professor Armitage said. "Your knowledge of science and medicine, however incomplete, would be a welcome addition to our research staff."

"Incomplete?" Mercury asked, frowning.

We turned a corner and found ourselves passing a series of laboratories where the experiments were getting stranger. The first room contained experiments with electricity involving glowing silver orbs, the next held something involving a human body floating in midair, and the third had a man sitting down holding his own brain while a trio of gigantic wasps encircled him.

"No offense was intended," Professor Armitage said, reacting to the surrounding experiments as if they were no more interesting than a child playing with building blocks. "The offer is genuine, though."

"What about Booth?" Mercury asked.

Professor Armitage wrinkled his nose. "I do not think his destiny lies with us."

It was strange, but as foul and disturbing as I found the University to be, the rejection made me want to reach over and crush Professor Armitage's throat. The hate and fury in my stomach was uncharacteristic, and I knew it to be a mark of the beast within. Suppressing it took a great exertion of will. My feelings must have shown on my face because Mercury reached over and pressed her hand against my shoulder, touching it despite it being covered in a horrifying substance.

"It's all right, Booth. I wouldn't belong to any group that would have me as a member anyway."

“You misunderstand my meaning,” Professor Armitage said, taking us to the end of the hall where a freight elevator awaited. There were no doors to the elevator and it looked like it’d been stripped for metal, except for the bottom half and cage.

“And what is your meaning?” I said, coming in with Mercury. She took position beside me.

“What I said,” Professor Armitage replied. “Time is a river. One can sail up and down it, but it only flows one way.”

Now he was just pissing me off. “I’m sick of your riddles and half-answers.”

Professor Armitage just smiled. “Then you’re going to hate this.”

Professor Armitage pushed down a knife switch built into the bottom of the elevator next to a dozen half-broken buttons, all of them going down. The elevator continued descending for twelve levels and then started passing bare rock.

Continuing our descent, we hit what would have been the sixteenth level and found ourselves in a cave. The air was no longer freezing, but I felt the wind from what looked to be a vast underground network of tunnels. The central chamber we were in was the size of an old Pre-Rising stadium.

It was not the size of the caverns or the tunnels leading out of them, of which there were at least fifty, that caught my attention. No, that was mere dross to the truly breathtaking sights that lay within. Spinning around the top of the cavern were glowing iridescent balls of blue light exchanging great bolts of electricity They whirled and twisted with a weird defiance of gravity that captured the imagination.

Around them floated images of other times, places, and dimensions. I saw the Earth when it was young, when the first humans came to this continent, when Europeans stole their land, and when Cthulhu washed human civilization clean. Somehow, I sensed that these bizarre rifts were the source of the humming in the back of my mind.

Great octagonal arches filled the chamber alongside canine teeth-like stalactites that built a pathway through an alien temple. The tiles on the ground were all octagonal, forming a weird pattern. Machines were set up throughout the cavern, cobbled together with wires and

aged computers and connected to devices that seemed to have no moving parts at all but free-floated in the air beside them.

More robed figures worked at the machinery, all possessing dull, lifeless eyes and faces devoid of emotion. The number of mutants among them was considerable. Some possessed deformed mouths, tentacle-like appendages ending in claws, and even trumpet-like horns where their nose should be like the now-extinct elephant.

I wanted to throw up again. Just looking at them triggered my gag reflex. Mercury covered her face in a mixture of pity and incredulity. As if she could not believe individuals would allow themselves to be changed like this without taking their own lives. Even more so, that they would work alongside the being that had so clearly inspired their deformities.

In the center of this wondrous and corrosive place was something the mutants at least partially resembled. It was an immense rugose cone, ten feet high, its head and other organs attached to foot-thick distensible limbs on its axis. Claws rested on two of these limbs, clicking together like an insect communicating with its fellows.

To my eyes, which occasionally saw more than a human's, this was but a mere shell for a vaster intelligence that wore the body encompassing it as you or I might wear a suit. I could not understand the full shape of the thing, but only perceived the barest edges of its multi-spatial, multi-temporal psychic presence.

Indeed, it was a member of the Great Race.

A Yithian.

Then it spoke to me, its words like a shout in the back of my mind rising up through my brain and shoving me a step backwards. Mercury, whose own psychic traits were just now developing, jumped three inches in the air. Professor Armitage, already a man of many mysteries, seemed unaffected.

"I have brought John Booth the Half-Human Gunslinger and Mercury the Sawbones Witch," Armitage proclaimed.

Mercury and I both shot him a nasty glare.

Greetings and welcome travelers, its words echoed in our head. *You have come just in time*.

"For what?" I whispered.

It still heard me.
For what? To save the world!

Chapter Four

It is to Mercury's credit that, even in the face of something beyond human comprehension, she kept her sense of humor. "You might want to look outside, Chief. I think you missed saving this world by about a hundred years."

"Forgive her, Great One," Professor Armitage said, clapping his hands and bowing his head.

The Great One gave a movement of his body that I assumed to be equivalent to a shrug or a laugh.

I am not much concerned by her pessimistic observation. I have possessed many humans over the centuries and know what it is to feel like one. In her position, *I too would feel the planet was doomed.*

The creature's psychic words were so powerful that they hard to listen to, but I listened anyway. "The human race, at least, is doomed. I heard from an avatar of Nyarl—"

"Do not speak that name!" Professor Armitage shouted. His voice took on a shrill, panicked quality which contrasted to his earlier smooth confidence.

"All right," I said, more confused than anything else. It wasn't as if Nyarlathotep were a secret god. Thousands of people across the Wasteland prayed to him nightly. Then again, perhaps I had merely grown used to the attention the Crawling Chaos paid me. I was one of his favorite playthings.

The Herald of Azathoth is not a being we need to invoke here, the Great One said, sloshing up to less than a yard away from us. *As for your belief that humanity is doomed*, *I believe that is a matter of perspective.*

"How so?" I asked. I would do anything, commit any atrocity, and break every creed I swore by, to prevent humanity's destruction. I wanted us to last longer than the three generations and was willing to murder, torture, or steal if I could achieve it.

Your species has gone through countless changes over its history with some branches going extinct while others thrived, the Great One explained. *If the Herald of Azathoth told you your race was*

doomed, *it is possible he meant it other than how he spoke. That being has doomed whole civilizations by telling them nothing but truth designed to mislead*.

I found myself intrigued by the creature's almost human manner. While ghouls, Deep Ones, and Serpent Men were capable of something similar, they were, after a fashion, humans themselves. All had been artificially evolved by the Elder Things from humankind's simian ancestors. The Great Race of Yith, though, was as wholly removed from man as the dinosaurs they'd once lived beside.

"I do not believe it is such an easy thing to avoid human extinction by saying it's all a matter of semantics."

Mercury did not share my skepticism. "How do we survive?"

Change, the Great One intoned. *Adapting to this environment you have found yourself in is the only way to survive. Evolution can allow species to become different in profound ways*, *but I fear the hand of natural selection will not help you. Instead*, *humanity must change through its own hand*.

Mercury slumped her shoulders and lowered her head. "You sound like Alan Ward."

"A stopped clock is right twice a day," Professor Armitage said, surprising me by defending the madman. "Doctor Ward was an evil monster and an enemy of this world, but that doesn't mean he wasn't right about some things."

The Great Race was doomed by its wars with hostile alien powers. The Great One conjured images of hideous flying polyps in our minds, tearing at thousands of creatures just like him (it?) in bizarre organic crystal cities. *With so few of our species remaining and the environment of the world turning hostile in the early days of your planet's ecology*, *we chose to send ourselves forward in time to possess a less-developed species after the danger had passed. This is our manner of survival.*

"You possess…people?" Mercury paled, perhaps realizing what we might have been brought here for.

Yes, the Great One said, gesturing with a clawed hand to the mutated robed figures nearby. *Though it is more a type of body-*

exchange. As my fellows work here, *experiencing this world*, *their host bodies' minds are back in our time doing the reverse. Someday*, *we will exchange bodies again and return with our findings*.

"Why return?" I asked. "I thought your people were dying in the past."

Humanity's time on Earth is not long enough for our needs nor much safer than the time we were under siege by the Flying Polyps. Which is as good a name as any for them, *John Henry Booth*, *as they have no name in a language you would understand. No*, *instead*, *we are merely studying this time. We shall project ourselves much further in the future*, *millions of years after now in fact*, *to possess a non-sentient species which inhabits the world after humanity's extinction.*

"Our extinction," I said. "Which is confirmed."

In the current timeline, *yes*, the Great One said. *Though definitions of extinction and survival depend greatly on one's perspective*.

"If you possess people, why are you here physically?" I asked, looking up and down the alien being before me.

The technology of the mind or magic as your race refers to it, the Great One made a noise which sounded like a snort of derision. *Humans are limited in their capacity to use it. Therefore*, *my people decided to physically send me forward so I could conduct advanced experiments in this time. You live in an age of wonders*, *even if I understand you can't appreciate them.*

Mercury narrowed her eyes. "Yes, it's rather hard to appreciate the Great Old Ones after they've killed billions."

Agreed, the Great One said. *When my work is done*, *I will abandon my body in this time period and join my fellows in the distant future*.

It was a surreal idea that took some time getting used to, even in a world where monsters and alien gods walked among us. The Yithians lived in the ancient past, experiencing linear time but choosing to psychically venture back and forth along its flow to study the cosmos. It was an enviably form of immortality but one with a cost. I could not help but think of the hundreds of humans they must

have ripped from their lives to throw into horrific bodies in a long dead age. Were the Yith the source of legends about demonic possession? I could not say but it disturbed me to the core. I was dealing with a race that did not hesitate to disregard the rights of individual humans in the pursuit of knowledge. Not that humans, themselves, displayed much concern for such.

"And what about all the *changes* some of these guys have undergone?" Mercury asked, looking among the mutants surrounding us.

"There is always a price for knowledge," Professor Armitage said, behind us. "The volunteers knew the risks."

That was a distinctly unsatisfying answer.

We used to be able to possess a body for decades without affecting the host. Sometimes, *we'd inhabit it for the duration of the host's natural life*, *but something has changed in the world and our consciousness now influences the more malleable parts of the human frame*, the Great One said, making clicking noises with its claws. *It is unfortunate*, *but has provided us many insights into the new laws of physics that currently govern this dimension*.

"So, are you going to take over all of us?" Mercury asked.

That would be a poor means of survival given your world's present state! The Great One made a noise like the one before, but louder. *No*, *our plans will take us several hundred million years into your future. By then*, *your planet will have cooled and become inhospitable to human life. Mankind will be gone by that time*, *whether by travel or extinction. No*, *we are here in this time because of curiosity—a chance to learn about another race born of this planet*.

I felt lightheaded. "What do you want us for? Armitage killed dozens of people and kidnapped us. What could be so important? You mentioned saving the world, but—"

I couldn't even save myself.

The Great One clicked its claws rapidly. *Kidnapped? Student*, *is this true?*

"Yes," Professor Armitage said. "I do not want to see this world end."

“Again, it’s hard to see how that’s going to happen,” Mercury said, looking around. “What would a double-ended world even look like?”

The total extinction of every plant, *animal*, *in-between*, *and microorganism on this planet*, the Great One said. *With the remainder of the world reduced to a lifeless*, *atmosphere-less ball before it is driven around the universe like a vehicle*.

It conjured images of just that to help its case.

“Yeah, that would be worse,” Mercury said, blinking. “How?”

The Unimaginable Horror, the Great One said, its psychic shouts softening. *It is a being that travels the cosmos and inhabits worlds capable of sustaining life*, *warps them to its service*, *and then feasts upon them before using the shell to travel to new ones.*

The Unimaginable Horror proved quite imaginable as we saw images of a living blackness crossing space and time in thickets of telekinetically-linked comets before striking worlds and *slithering* out onto them. We saw an accelerated depiction of the Earth’s creation when several hundred such “comets” came to our planet during its earliest days. The leaking process involved a medium of melting fluid flowing from the crashed asteroid’s surface onto the primordial Earth below.

I knew what was being depicted. “Wait, the Unimaginable Horror is the *ocean*?”

“Inside it,” Professor Armitage said. “Much of the water that covers our planet came from comets. Its foul psychic presence was contained within the venerable ice forming them. The Unimaginable Horror would forever taint our waters and lead to who knows what strange mutations that became part of the races evolved on our planet.”

I was too stunned to reply. Even our *water* was tainted?

Was nothing sacred?

Mercury stared at the Great One.

The Unimaginable Horror lay dormant until other terrors came from beyond the stars to the primordial Earth. Whether they were drawn by the Unimaginable Horror or found the world by chance, *I cannot say*. The Great One clicked its claws. *However*, *they soon*

discovered the terrible presence lurking inside and combined their powers against it.

"What happened next?" I said, trying to distract myself from the immense hatred bubbling in my chest.

The Unimaginable Horror was destroyed, the Great One said, surprising me. As much as such a creature can be destroyed.

"Kind of lame for a guy named the Unimaginable Horror," Mercury said. "I thought you said this thing was dangerous."

Nice, Mercury. Go ahead, tempt fate.

We are not the Great Old Ones. They are as far above the Yithians as— The Great One paused. *Well*, *I'm sure you can imagine*.

"The Yithians are above us," is what he wanted to say. Amazing, the Great One was an eldritch creature with manners.

"I take it didn't stay dead?" I had a funny feeling that was where this story was going.

"That is not dead which can eternal lie, and with strange aeons even death may die," Professor Armitage quoted the *Necronomicon*.

I was getting sick of that quote. "Go on."

The Yithians were once not so unlike humanity in its foolishness. The Great One clicked its claws several times, referring to its own race by their formal name as opposed to the title he'd been using this entire time. *Scientists seeking to master the technology of the mind came to worship the Unimaginable Horror's remains and sought their power. Driven insane by what they saw*, *their debased rituals helped restore the creature to life. We were forced to fight it.*

I grimaced, realizing the Yithians had experienced their own version of the Rising. "Did you defeat it?"

The Great One was silent.

Professor Armitage answered for him. "No, they did not."

We were already weakened by war with another species. The Unimaginable Horror earned its name by destroying much of what was left of our civilization. Even its short period of consciousness warped the climate of our world to the point that most species went extinct. The Great One depicted a cataclysm the likes of which is difficult to put into words. Sixty-five million years ago as it was to me,

it was yesterday to the Yithians. The stars were not right, *though*, *and the weakened Unimaginable Horror fell into a fitful slumber.*

"I'm sorry," I said, surprised how much I meant it. It seemed both our races had been cursed by the Great Old Ones.

The Unimaginable Horror had a great tower built around it by our greatest psionic engineer, *Zhaal the Dreamer. We sealed his tower with our strongest technology*, *even turning to older forbidden technologies taught to us by the Great Old Ones' minion species. We could not destroy the Unimaginable Horror or even contain it*, *but we could imprison it. The Tower of Zhaal would remain outside time and space in a place that was nowhere and everywhere at once. The stars would never be right around it*, *and with the rising of the other Great Old Ones*, *it remained asleep.*

I was confused now. "If you could do that, why not do it to all the Great Old Ones?"

We would have died.

Well, that answer made sense. "OK, then."

"Which brings us to the present," Professor Armitage said, perhaps hoping to speed things along. "We wish you to prevent the Unimaginable Horror from waking up."

I stared at him. "What the hell am I supposed to do against something like *that*?"

Kill the person trying to wake him up, the Great One said. *That will prevent the Tower of Zhaal from being disturbed*.

OK. "Who's trying to wake the Unimaginable Horror up?"

You may continue this story, *Student*.

"A man named Marcus Whateley," Professor Armitage said. "He wishes to purge the world of all sentient life as a mercy killing."

"He might have a point," Mercury said.

Professor Armitage glared. "This is no laughing matter. Marcus was a student of the University from the Dunwych's royal lineage—his bloodline had long practiced the occult arts and he was a quick study. I welcomed him in hopes of ending a longtime feud between our families. In time, he mastered every secret I'd learned and several more besides."

“Why does he want to destroy the world? What’s this guy get out of it? Does he think the Unimaginable Horror will reward him?” If so, he was a fool. The Great Old Ones barely understood how humans existed, similar to how a person might understand flies come from maggots.

Professor Armitage looked unsettled. “He believed the Great Race allowed humanity to die so they could someday claim the planet. Marcus does not believe humanity had a future, so by summoning the Unimaginable Horror, he hopes he can spoil the world for the Great Race and any future species that might inhabit it.”

“So he wants to destroy the rest of humanity, all the other races, and humanity for spite?” I asked, wanting to be sure I’d gotten his motivations down.

“Yes.”

I smirked. “I understand *that* completely.”

“So do I.” Mercury nodded. “It’s the most human thing I’ve heard today.”

“I’m glad you find this all so amusing.” Professor Armitage furrowed his brow. Removing his glasses, he cleaned them on his robe.

“Why hasn’t he unleashed the Unimaginable Whatzits already?” Mercury asked.

“As long as the Tower of Zhaal stands, the Unimaginable Horror will remain asleep, trapped out of time,” Professor Armitage answered. “But if the tower is disturbed, then it will awaken and kill us all.”

“I repeat,” I said, sighing. “What do you need me for? I’ve killed a few wizards in my time, but you had me dead to rights.”

We can’t find him, the Great One admitted. *Marcus has rendered himself invisible to any methods we might use to find him.*

I snorted. “You’re the survivors of a million-year-old civilization and you can’t find a guy who escaped you?”

No, the Great One said. *We also do not know where the tower is or from where it can be summoned. Those involved in the Tower of Zhaal’s construction were killed to protect its location. Zhaal ordered it before committing suicide*.

“Wow, I can’t see how *that* could backfire,” Mercury deadpanned.

Ah, *yes*, *sarcasm. That is one element of human speech I could do without.*

Against my better judgment, I was starting to like the Great One. “So, you need us to track down Marcus Whateley the old-fashioned way.”

We have a team to assist you, *but functionally*, *yes.*

Now that I understood, I was comfortable bargaining. “What do we get out of it?”

Mercury looked at me like I was crazy. Perhaps because I was touching my uncorrupted flesh with the blackened paw that had replaced my hand.

“You mean aside from the world not ending?” Professor Armitage asked. “Which contains you, I might add.”

“Yes,” I said.

The Great One’s response surprised me, as I’d assumed it would offer to fix my arm. Instead, he said, *I will save your species from annihilation.*

Well, you can’t have everything.

Chapter Five

My stomach was queasy, both from the memory of the wound I'd suffered earlier and the implications of the Great One's words.

"You'll … save humanity?" My mouth was dry, the words coming out slowly. I wanted to believe what the monster was saying but couldn't bring myself to do so. Humanity's hour was passed, and we were just waiting for the Grim Reaper to finish us all off.

It does not have to be that way, *John*, the Great One replied. *It is within my power to shape for you a new world in another galaxy*, *safe and secure from the cosmos's predators. We will then transfer a breeding population in sufficient numbers of pure human stock to the planet with the right equipment to build a self-sustaining civilization. Your race will survive on a world of plains*, *deserts*, *and rivers*.

I saw the world as he described it. A place with a blue-green sun hanging in the air, vast herds of mutated cattle, six-legged horses, and no monsters. It was not a paradise of utopian cities and great technology, but it was a hell of a lot better than our own world. So much so that I questioned whether it existed anywhere but the Dreamlands.

"Do you see it?" I asked Mercury, trying to keep my voice flat and even.

"Yes," Mercury said, reaching over to place her hand on my shoulder, her eyes filled with a cautious optimism. More than anything, I believed my lover wanted to find a home away from the death and destruction life on the Earth had become. It was a dream shared by all humans.

Yet I was unmoved.

"No," I said, staring up at the Great One.

Mercury looked between me and the Great One. I could tell she was stunned at the selfishness of my decision. "Booth, could we talk about this?"

"I refuse for multiple reasons. First, I don't believe a pure human strain exists. There is something creepy and crawly in every single

person's family tree if you dig deep enough. Two, if you could build your own planet, then you wouldn't want this one."

The Great One made multiple clicking noises with its claws, which I understood despite our immense language barriers as the equivalent of having his hand caught in the cookie jar.

"Three." I raised a third finger. "I do not believe all these humans here would be so enamored of you and willing to sacrifice everything if you had not already promised them something similar."

"You are more intelligent than your appearance suggests," Professor Armitage said, staring at me. "The world promised to humanity is located in the Dreamlands."

I grit my teeth. "So, you promise us an illusion."

Human consciousness will live on in that dimension, the Great One said. *It is a form of survival. One the Great Race prefers not to lower itself to*, *but one we keep as an option should the necessity for migrating there come to pass*.

Mercury growled, clearly angry over the Yithian's betrayal. "Survival isn't everything. We want to build a new life for ourselves and our people. Living in a dream just means we're alive until the dreamer decides to wake up."

Better than this world, the Great One replied. *Where you have only a few decades left. With our dream-crafting machines*, *we can sustain your people for millions of years more. Longer than you would last on your own.*

"And what do you think, Armitage?" I looked to my side. I expected the professor to be of the same basic stuff as myself, unimpressed with being a science experiment.

Armitage looked at me, narrowing his eyes. "It's better than nothing."

I took a deep breath. "Then let me make a counteroffer. We have a child, Jackie. We'd like to enroll her here with the promise she'll be allowed to become part of the University's staff someday. It's safer here than elsewhere. I should warn you, she's a ghoul, though, and will undergo the transformation into one of their kind when she reaches her thirties."

Mercury glared at me. "You should have asked me, John."

“Do you disagree?” I asked.

“No.” Mercury lowered her head.

Understood, the Great One said. *Your request is granted*.

“That decision should have been made by me, Great One,” Professor Armitage said. “But, yes, we can always make room for one more student. I just hope she’s able to keep up.”

“She will,” Mercury said, proud of her adopted child. “I can promise you that. She’s a doctor in the making and I don’t mean the crude whiskey arm-cutters that pass for them nowadays. The ghouls will be lucky to have her.”

How ironic Mercury was able to give so much love to Jackie, but was so revolted by my changes.

“Also, will you fix my arm?” I said, raising the cursed appendage. “I want to be human again. I want to be with my lover and not have her recoil in disgust.”

The Great One leaned over its conical body to look closer. *You are what you are. However*, *I can teach you how to transfer minds with another being. The Great Race will grow for you a body in your idealized image and you may transfer your consciousness into it.*

I pondered his offer. “What will happen to my double in my old body?”

We will destroy it.

I pondered that. Would I really be me? Would I know? Would Mercury? I decided to risk it. “All right.”

Then we have an accord? the Great One asked.

“Do you want anything?” I looked at Mercury.

“Nice of you to ask,” Mercury muttered. “I want access to your knowledge stores, too. I want to live as long as John will and to have magic that will allow us to be together.”

Agreed, the Great One said. *You will live as long as John the human. Your bodies are weak and easily broken but simple to repair*.

“Then we have an agreement,” I said.

Splendid, the Great One said. *Professor Armitage*, *would you be so kind as to introduce Mister Booth and Ms. Halsey to the associates we’ve gathered for them?*

“I work better with a single partner,” I said, just barely avoiding saying I work better alone. I was a former R&E Ranger. I knew the Wasteland and how harsh it was, as well as how to find a man even across the rugged, mostly-barren terrain of the twenty-second century. I didn’t want a bunch of doddering old academics slowing my search down. I trusted Mercury could keep up, but there were precious few others in the world I believed could.

“Marcus is not to be underestimated,” Professor Armitage said, his voice still holding hints of anger. “You defeated Doctor Ward, but as I recall, that was with an army of Dunwych warriors.”

I grimaced, remembering the slaughter that day. “I don’t like working with people I don’t trust.”

“Neither do I,” Professor Armitage intoned. “However, we all make sacrifices for survival.”

Seeing as I was getting nowhere, I let the matter drop. “Very well.”

“Look at the bright side, Booth, this could be an opportunity to make new contacts and associates. There’s nothing better to bond over than the murder of a mad cultist out to destroy the world.”

Is there not? The Great One asked, rising back up to full height. *I would have thought there was any number of other activities more suited to fellowship*.

Mercury looked up at the Great One.

I was joking.

“Ha ha,” Mercury said, softly.

“Follow me,” Professor Armitage said, gesturing with his crystal rod. “We keep our most sensitive materials down here.”

Professor Armitage started walking down a side path of the alien-technology-filled caverns far below Miskatonic University’s ruins. I had heard of the vast natural caverns twisting and turning beneath the whole of New England. My departed friend Richard Jameson, a ghoul, told me often about how there were literally hundreds of thousands of miles worth of tunnels leading to a vast civilization of ghouls—one as devastated by the Rising as humanity.

I did not necessarily believe him, but I’d seen the tunnels and heard of many still-surviving cities down there. Someday, I wanted to journey there to see if I could make contact with them. If we could

ever overcome the xenophobia existing between our two races, and the fact that ghouls considered human corpses a delicacy, then we might make good allies.

Mercury, as always, was focused on more practical concerns. “So, what sort of posse have you assembled to go with us?”

Armitage didn’t look back as he walked down the side of an oddly smooth tunnel. “Killers, thieves, murderers, and savages.”

“So, pretty much a normal bunch of Wastelanders?” Mercury asked, smiling.

“Yes.” Professor Armitage actually smiled.

“You don’t like us very much, do you?” Mercury asked, expressing more interest in Professor Armitage’s attitude than I cared to know.

“Which is strange, since you’re the guy who killed all of our associates,” I added, less than friendly.

Professor Armitage paused mid-step. “I was there, young but there, when humanity’s survivors were still vast in number. A seventh of the world’s population was still in the billions, and I watched them slaughter each other for cans of peaches. When the Deep Ones tried to claim the world in the name of Cthulhu, they died in the fallout brought from humanity’s weapons. They were unaware they did not have Cthulhu’s favor any more than humans did. When the ghouls attempted to offer their help to both races so they might rebuild, man attempted to destroy them as well, finding they were far more prepared to deal with both. The seventh was seventhed and seventhed again until there was little more than a scattered handful of madmen realizing how close to extinction they were.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Mercury asked, both of us stopping.

“To him, we are the murderous savages left over from what was a civilization of enlightened men,” I suggested. “The ugly mutant remnant of a better race.”

Mercury narrowed her eyes.

“Yes,” Professor Armitage said, having the decency to sound ashamed. “I could tell you more, about how the New Arkhamites’ Rangers have murdered and exploited those I have called friends,

but in the end, I don't like you because you're outsiders. Creatures of the Wasteland."

"And that's so much worse than the time-traveling aliens possessing people," Mercury said sarcastically.

"Very much so," Professor Armitage said. "They are helping us rebuild. Things that would have otherwise been lost have been restored to us. Secrets of producing electricity, food, and clean water and protecting ourselves from the Old Ones have all been made available to us. You may dislike the Great Race, Doctor Halsey, but they have done more for us than our fellow humans."

"They give you trinkets and lord over you," I said, contemptuous. "They will claim this planet for themselves and move us to reservations in the Dreamlands if they don't exterminate us outright. Whenever a technologically advanced society meets a lesser one, they abuse and betray them. The Yithians are no different."

"Because that is what humanity has done throughout history?" Professor Armitage asked.

"Yes," I muttered. "We're not that different."

"I disagree. If they wanted us dead, they could just project themselves into the future and seize all of our bodies."

"Maybe they don't want to be weak and easily broken, however simple to repair. We're just the vermin under the porch they want to lure out into the wild rather than shoot."

"Is it so hard to believe they just want to help us?" Professor Armitage asked, looking me straight in the eyes.

"In my experience? Yes." I pointed my black-clawed forefinger at his chest.

Professor Armitage looked down at the ground. "Then maybe that's why humanity is dying."

There was nothing more to say to that. The three of us continued down the tunnel until we came to a large cavern where an octagonal building stood. It was made of some unfamiliar metal, shining and reflective, possessed of its own light, which glowed in the darkness of the cavern.

I blinked rapidly and had to narrow my gaze to prevent myself from taking it in all at once. Much like my arm, it seemed there were

qualities of the metal that did not exist in three-dimensional space. It was one of the ways the Great Old Ones and the other elder species proofed their construction. If a thing did not exist in time or space, it could never be destroyed—at least, that was my theory.

“What’s so important here?” I asked, watching Professor Armitage advance on the building. There was no door or window I could see.

“Knowledge,” Professor Armitage said, his gaze becoming intense. “It is a time capsule in case the University is destroyed.”

Professor Armitage tapped his crystal rod on the side of the object and an octagonal door appeared. A light from inside shone outward, and I covered my eyes. Professor Armitage ignored it and headed on in.

“Kind of a shitty time capsule if no one can get in it but the guys who have magic wands,” Mercury said, following him. “Speaking of which, do we get one of those?”

“No,” Professor Armitage said. “You will not.”

“Spoilsport.”

I snorted, smiling. I didn’t know what I would do without her. One of the reasons I was so desperate to recover my humanity.

You will never be human again, the voices in my head said. *You will walk this world’s ashes.*

Liar, I cursed them.

Covering my eyes with my left arm, I walked forward into the brilliant light and found it softening as I heard the walls bubble behind me like water. The path behind me was sealed, having morphed together as if the metal were liquid. When my eyes adjusted to the illumination, I found myself in a most unexpected location.

The largest library I’d ever seen.

Chapter Six

The interior of the chamber was the largest library I'd ever seen. It was far larger on the inside than its initial size had suggested, distorting space by stretching endlessly in four directions. I saw row after row of shelved books, when a single volume was a precious resource in the Wasteland.

The actual shape of the library was amazing, as there were levels of it above, below, and to our sides. Space was folded in upon itself in dizzying and bizarre ways. If one concentrated, one could see in every direction to massive heights and depths. Indeed, if I concentrated hard enough, I saw myself, Mercury, and Professor Armitage moving through the library at different points in time.

"Booth?" Mercury turned around, unaffected.

I held my head as I saw past these new passages to other dimensions beyond the library made of angles that did not exist on Earth. The shapes were manifold and beautiful, containing colors entrancing to look upon. Looking through inhuman eyes I hadn't known I possessed, I perceived the totality of the eldritch shapes around me. Enchanted by what I saw, I looked deeper. This was a foolish mistake because it revealed the *things* that lived there.

The geometrically impossible beings shifted, skulked, and moved across the space beyond in ways that perverted my understanding of how matter interacted with position. They were everywhere, nowhere, and somewhere at once, occupying both more and less than the space they inhabited. I could see their physical bodies, but like the Yithian, I could see more—and regretted it.

At three dimensions, the beings beyond were hulking, vaguely centaur-like things with four legs and two arms and hideous, whip-like bodies. They did not so much possess heads as gaping maws at the ends of their snake-like torsos. Their skin was covered in a chitinous material that was all too familiar. I'd seen it growing across my arm for over a year now. Sadly, this was not the end of my insights into their being. I saw the parts of their body that were four-dimensional, including humanoid and animal bodies of an infinite

variety all superimposed onto a single moment in time. There were thousands of them, millions perhaps, and from them, I sensed a profound feeling of *kinship*.

I fell to my knees, overwhelmed by the stimuli surrounding me. Looking down, I saw the beings beyond watching me from below as if I were staring into a window. Slowly, they became more distinct, as if becoming real through my observation. One of them reached out a clawed hand identical to my own. I felt compelled to reach down toward it. When we were about to touch, the monsters vanished. The extra dimensions vanished. My right hand rested on firm luminescent white flooring. Blinking my eyes, I saw an ordinary, although massive, library. There were hundreds of bookshelves. The interior was larger than the exterior, but it was not quite so sanity-blasting. There were no walls in the building, any more than the white flooring or ceiling above us was solid, but I mentally insisted there were to drive away the images I'd just witnessed. I lied to myself in a repeated chant.

This is just an ordinary room. This is just an ordinary room. This is just an ordinary room. I did not deny the existence of the monsters beyond, lest I acknowledge their existence at all.

"Booth," Mercury said beside me. "Are you OK?"

How could she not see it? I then realized that though it had felt like a lifetime, it had only been seconds. "Yes. I'm fine."

"Forgive me," Professor Armitage said. "I did not expect you to be able to see the library's true nature. It requires several months of attuning one's mind to the nature of the Other-Angled Place."

"Other-Angled place?" I asked.

"It is what we call the interior of the Hinton Library," Professor Armitage said. "It is a place that exists inside time."

"Aren't all things inside time?" Mercury asked, helping me to my feet.

"No," Professor Armitage said. "All things are a part of time. I could try and explain it to you, but it would take hours we do not have. The short version is this is a place we feel is safe from the Great Old Ones and the damage they do to creation. Here, we attempt to restore all of humanity's lost knowledge. If something is

written down but missing, like the *Tome of Itchus* or Aristotle's *Second Poetics*, we can use the library to travel to the past to recover it. Such missions are not undertaken often, but we have done enough to help patch a small measure of humanity's lost records."

I stared at him. "You can travel through time too?"

"Yes," Professor Armitage said, nodding.

"Then—" I started to say.

"We tried to warn the people of the Pre-Rising world," Professor Armitage cut me off. "We failed. Many times. What we perceive as history is but a drop of water in a great pool of possibilities."

"Can you explain that in a bit more detail?" I asked.

"No," Professor Armitage said. "Come, let us go."

"I …" I hesitated to bring up what I'd seen. "I saw creatures. Things hidden behind the walls."

"There are no walls, Booth," Mercury said, still looking around at my words.

"The Eyes of Yog-Sothoth," Professor Armitage said. "They are the neighbors to this room."

Yog-Sothoth was a name frequently mentioned in the *Necronomicon*, even more so than Cthulhu or Azathoth, if you could believe it. Unfortunately, even among the many occult texts I'd read, there was no clear definition of what it was. Yog-Sothoth was everywhere and everywhen in the universe but somehow separate. Per legend, Yog-Sothoth wanted to become a part of our world and experience it through the eyes of mortals. It was an act that would turn reality inside out. Maybe his succeeding was the action that had caused the stars to change and the Great Old Ones to rise.

"They seemed … familiar," I said.

"Interesting," Professor Armitage said, smiling.

Bastard.

"Is this place where you got that power to walk miles in an instant?" Mercury asked, thankfully changing the subject.

"Yes," Professor Armitage said, reassuring us. "One cannot travel through an environment without becoming a part of it in time. The

consequences for some of our researchers have been … troublesome … but most enjoy the sense of power it gives."

"Lovely," I muttered, shaking my head. "The Yithians gave you this place?"

"No," Professor Armitage said, surprising me. "Marcus Whateley made it for us."

"Suddenly, I'm a lot less convinced of its security," I muttered.

Professor Armitage just sneered.

I really didn't like him. Unfortunately, I couldn't just shoot him like I could any other asshole I disliked in the Wasteland. We had a deal and that was one of the few things still sacred. Still, I imagined gunning him in the street when he tried to reach for his wand.

"Charming, Captain," Professor Armitage said, revealing he could read my thoughts.

"This suddenly got a lot more complicated," Mercury said, eyes straining as if trying to see what was really around her. "Do you think you could help me perceive these creatures? I've learned to expand my sight with the spells found in the *Necronomicon*."

"Don't," I said, lifting my left hand. "Please."

Mercury shrugged. "I'm a scientist, Booth. I want to learn, even if it costs me what remains of my sanity."

I gave a half-pained smile. "It's madness that allows us to live, Mercury. I'm not afraid you'll go crazy. I'm afraid you'll go sane."

Mercury stared at me, unsure how to respond to my heartfelt statement. That was when she did a double take and looked at my arm. "Booth!"

I dropped my gaze and saw what she was looking at. Where my arm had once been corrupted by perverse forces, it was now bronze and human-like. Veins were visible underneath my skin and I could see my fingerprints on the ends of each digit. Looking at it made me want to cry.

But it didn't *feel* different.

Mercury gave me a hug and a kiss, but I just stared at the offending appendage. Something wasn't right.

"I'm afraid your arm hasn't healed." Professor Armitage causally destroyed our moment of happiness. "I have covered your arm in an

illusion. Our other contractors may not be as *understanding* of your mutation as those here at the University. Let alone the people in the Wasteland you might have to deal with."

Hope fled from Mercury's eyes as she looked down at my human-looking arm and saw the trick it was.

I stared death at Armitage. "You could have just given me some bandages and a coat."

"Thanks for nothing," Mercury said.

"You're welcome." Professor Armitage turned around and started walking again.

Tired of talking to Armitage, I walked behind him and focused on the bookshelves and their contents around me as to not lose myself in the physics-defying architecture that had overwhelmed me moments before. There were books on medicine, science, history, famous figures of the past, and all manner of other topics that would be invaluable to rebuilding civilization should humanity somehow retake the Earth from its neighbors. However, my attention was not piqued until we arrived at the section of the library dealing with occult topics. There were an immense number of books on the supernatural, dwarfing the other topics I'd seen in variety, only a handful of which I recognized (and I was something of an expert on the subject).

The shelves contained mainstays like multiple translations of the *Necronomicon*, varied editions of the *Book of Eibon*, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, *The Black Keys of Solomon*, and so on, but rarer texts too. I saw the first three volumes of *Cthulhu Unbound*, the *Re'Kitnid*, the *Cythallapendium*, *The Sorcerer Kings of Stygia*, *The King in Yellow* (musical version), *The Hyperborean Cycle*, *The Dark Corners of the Earth*, Doctor Dominique O'Brien's *Unnatural Mathematics*, *The Testimonials of Aphra Marsh*, The *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth*, a perhaps-useful *The Unimaginable Horror*, *In the Shadow of the Dark Tower*, and even a complete set of horror novelist Sutter Cane's works.

I was a seasoned-enough occultist to know the majority of books that surrounded these tomes were worth less than the paper they were printed on. Here among the books that had a glimmer of the

truth were mad misunderstandings of the beings' true nature, attributing elemental classifications or a struggle between good and evil which humanity might survive by siding with the right deity. Yet I wanted to spend a year poring over them and their secrets.

"I don't see how you expect us to track this guy down if he can build something like this," Mercury said, marching between me and Professor Armitage. "You crossed a couple of hundred miles in a few seconds. We won't be able to catch up."

"He will travel on foot with no magic. That is the only way he can protect himself from our science," Professor Armitage replied. "You will also be able to identify him at a glance."

"Why?" I asked, growing increasingly frustrated with these word games.

At least when I was an R&E Ranger, people had been willing to give me straight answers. Ever since he'd murdered my companions at the caravan, Armitage and his cohorts had been trying to manipulate me. If they wanted me to succeed in this quest and stop their wayward scientist, they'd drop the act and talk to me man-to-man.

Instead, I got the impression they were doing this begrudgingly at best. Did they want the world destroyed? Or was it because they'd get their consciousnesses preserved in some Dreamlands zoo that they didn't really care what happened to the planet Earth? I hoped he could hear my doubts, because I wasn't about to play his games. I also projected some nasty images of my horribly murdering Armitage and the rest of the Miskatonic University staff for emphasis.

I could do it, too.

Armitage, however, didn't rise to my bait. "You'll recognize Marcus Whately because he's nine feet tall and has other *distinguishing* characteristics. Believe me, any locals you question will find him memorable," Professor Armitage said, his voice cold and businesslike.

"He's a half-human then," I said.

"He's a half-god," Professor Armitage corrected. "The child of a Dunwych priestess and Yog-Sothoth conceived during an ancient and forbidden rite. The other Dunwych were so horrified by what

they had created, they slaughtered the entirety of the royal lineage in retribution. They did not dare kill their god's child, though, and left him to die by exposure. Instead, one of them brought him to us to raise."

"How very Moses in the bullrushes," I muttered.

"More like the serpent in the garden," Professor Armitage replied. "I would have rather handled this in-house, but the Great Race predicted you had the greatest chance of success. I only believe them because they have never been wrong before. Frankly, your reputation as monster slayers seems a trifle exaggerated."

"Says the guy who butchered a caravan of innocents for no reason," Mercury said, disgusted. "You'll forgive me if I don't take your opinion on who has the true grit all that seriously."

"You're forgiven," Professor Armitage said. "As for innocents, I don't believe they exist."

"Spoken like a true bandit," I said. "I have killed many men and women to survive. That doesn't mean I'm an assassin. The only people I've ever hunted down to kill were Alan Ward and Peter Goodhill. Both men who needed killing. I'm not an assassin."

It was perhaps not the best defense ever spoken. Still, I hated Armitage's attitude and I didn't entirely believe the story they'd fed me about Marcus Whateley. The Great One had already proven itself a liar, and only the fact that I was over a barrel with my imminent transformation into a monster kept me working for them.

"Not an assassin? Even to save your world?" Professor Armitage said. "I killed your people because they stood in the way of stopping Whateley, however briefly."

"I think you did it because you liked it," Mercury said.

"You don't know me at all," Professor Armitage said. "However, thankfully, we're almost where we have to be."

"And where the hell is that?" I asked.

"With our guests," Professor Armitage said. He stopped again and raised his crystal rod to point at a nearby table in a space between shelves. There, five figures were standing or sitting, looking bored.

I recognized them all.

"*Those* are the people you recruited?" Mercury asked, horrified.

“Yes,” Professor Armitage said. “I’m afraid so.”

“We are screwed.” I felt my face. “Completely.”

The Yithians had recruited four of the worst criminals in the Wasteland. Oh, and one of my ex-squad mates.

Yeah, this mission was off to a *great* start.

Chapter Seven

You could identify everyone here by their wanted posters. In the Wasteland of New England, there were almost no laws, and life was cheap. This meant the people who *were* considered outlaws were doubly dangerous.

Standing to the left of the table was a Hispanic-looking man with a neat, well-trimmed beard and messy hair. He was dressed in the attire of a rancher but it was of a finer cut than most, showing he'd gone to great lengths to make sure he appeared dashing when most had long since ceased to care about such things.

This was Thom Braddock, the gunslinger. Thom had marauded his way all the way up from the former state of Texas, a feat I could scarcely imagine since I'd been a professional explorer once and only made it as far as the ruins of Ohio. We'd encountered each other once before, and I considered it a testament to my skill that I'd made it out alive.

Sitting at the table was a woman with thick dreadlocks, chocolate-brown skin, larger-than-normal eyes, and a lovely face with full lips. She was wearing the leather vest, white shirt, and brown linen pants of a typical Wasteland scavenger. A pair of goggles rested around her neck, and I saw a breath-mask for Dust Zone exploration as well. It was Bobbie Merriweather, a Deep One Hybrid who was a former member of the Esoteric Order of Dagon. I remembered her because that cult had murdered dozens of travelers seeking to drink at their oasis. Bobbie had ended up slaughtering half of them and betraying the rest to Alpha Team of the R&E Rangers. Apparently, she'd had some sort of religious experience that had turned her against her people and their religion.

I wasn't intimately familiar with the woman, but I knew her hatred for her race's religion was almost as deep as mine for whatever I was turning into. The fact Bobbie hadn't yet progressed into a full Deep One surprised me. Indeed, she looked like she'd only begun the transformation, and we'd first met a decade before. Of this group, Bobbie had the least history of criminal activity, but that still didn't

mean I'd relax around her. She had killed several Cthulhu worshipers who'd been well-respected in their community.

Beside Bobbie, wearing a gray robe like the Yithian cultists but more tattered and careworn, was August Bierce. August was a well-known practitioner of the occult arts and known in some circles as "The Dreadful Summoner." A story had been circulated that a community had driven him and his husband out for their mystical practices, only for a gigantic claw to rise from the ground and drag an entire town down into the depths of the Earth.

I believed it.

August was a smug-looking chocolate-skinned man in his late thirties. He radiated the kind of attitude I got from Professor Armitage. The gaze August received from the latter told me they were not friends, though. Its intensity and heat told me that Professor Armitage hated him even more than he despised us. If August was a former student of the University, he'd parted with it on poor terms.

The fourth member of the group, sitting beside August, was the one most familiar to me. Once, I'd been willing to call her my best friend, but our parting had not been pleasant. Jessica O'Reilly was a pretty brown-haired woman the same age as me who now possessed a long scar on her right cheek. She was wearing a faded blue unadorned New Arkham military uniform that she'd obviously scavenged.

Jessica and I had grown up together, attended school together, trained together, and been friends since well before we'd been in the same unit. In many ways, her life was far more tragic than mine. She'd been married once with two children but lost all three to the horrors of the Wasteland. A former R&E Ranger, she'd turned on me when I started to turn. I won our duel, but spared her life.

Last I heard, Jessica had been leading a group of bandits preying on travelers out of the Boston Ash Fields. There were rumors she killed anyone with the slightest trace of inhuman blood. I found that difficult to believe. Not for my sake, but the fact that she, too, had been Richard Jameson's friend. Jessica's look of surprise at my appearance and my human-seeming arm was covered quickly, and she remained seated.

Finishing the circle was a tall man of Caucasian descent. His head was shaved, but he had a short, well-trimmed black beard. He was wearing an open button-up shirt that had seen better days, a belt covered in pouches, and faded denim pants. Up and down his arms, as well as on his scalp, were tattoos of snakes, monsters, and shadowy creatures that moved around underneath his skin.

Mathew Blake.

A member of the Dunwych tribes, he was something of an amateur archaeologist. Mathew Blake traveled the Wasteland looking for relics useful for restoring the human race, be they magical or of historical significance. Whether the owners of these objects wished to depart with them was not a concern for Mister Blake, and he'd managed to loot the treasures of many powerful individuals. I imagined his mouth was salivating at the awful wonders surrounding us.

"Well, isn't this a fine how-do-you-do," Jessica said, speaking in an affected Pre-Rising Southern accent.

"First, we get a Fish-Woman and now we've got the Black Soldier and his girl sidekick," Thom said, picking *The Great God Pan* from the bookshelf behind him.

The Black Soldier was a nickname given to me after the fall of the Black Cathedral and the death of Alan Ward. It was a reference to a Wasteland scare legend about a Grim Reaper-type figure some associated with the god Nyarlathotep. No one had any clue how right they were.

"Hey, Booth is *my* sidekick," Mercury said, eyeing Thom. "Don't forget it!"

"This Fish-Woman can find this asshole the University is looking for on her own," Bobbie said, slapping her webbed fingers on the table. "Armitage, I don't need this group. They'll just get in my way."

"I don't care if I'm given back what is mine," August replied, his stare containing a hint of something ungodly.

"A pleasure to meet you, Captain Booth, Doctor Halsey," Mathew said, walking over to extend his hand to us both. "I've long been a fan of both your works. Doctor Halsey, your treatise on Tunneler

migration patterns was most informative. I read it on my last visit to New Arkham's library."

"I wrote that before I realized the magnetic poles were shifting," Mercury said, smiling. "I could do a much more accurate treatment today."

I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, too."

Mathew looked down at my right hand as if feeling something strange, then shook his head. "Our little party has been arguing about who is in charge since we were assembled."

"That's because I am," Thom said, starting to read.

"Over my dead body," Bobbie said, snarling.

"That can be arranged." Thom didn't bother looking up from his book.

I suspected if any of them had weapons, this gathering would have ended in bloodshed before our arrival.

"Captain Booth is in charge," Professor Armitage said, staring at them.

"Ah, shit," Jessica said, grimacing.

Mercury's expression was one of undisguised loathing.

Jessica turned away.

"Like hell," Thom said, staring over at me. "I'm the best one—"

Professor Armitage lifted his crystal rod in the air and it made an eerie chiming noise. Everyone fell silent.

Professor Armitage's voice was powerful and commanding. "The Great One picked Captain Booth to head this team and Doctor Halsey to be his second. This is not up for discussion. All of you were made promises for your cooperation. There are things the Yithians can grant you that are unavailable anywhere else in the Wasteland. For example, if you want your dead brother restored, Mister Braddock, I suggest you do not dissent."

Thom looked down, then back at me. "You're in charge, Captain."

Oh yeah, this was going to go well. I'd led a Ranger unit for a decade while still a Remnant citizen. Gamma Squad had been a group of professionals who knew what they were doing. People I could trust. Family. Seeing this collection of misfits, especially with Jessica here, was a bad joke.

“I’m willing to give the Black Soldier a chance. We’ve worked together before.” Bobbie leaned back in her chair. “Of course, I didn’t get a chance to offend him either.”

Bobbie looked over at Jessica.

“What about us, Booth?” Jessica asked.

“Don’t talk to me unless you have something to say about our mission,” I said to her. “That’s where we stand.”

“I see,” Jessica said, sighing. “I’m fine taking orders from him.”

The others acquiesced to my leadership, which changed the situation from a major clusterfuck into just kind of one.

“What do you hope to accomplish with this group, Armitage?” I asked, surveying the collection of murderers and thieves around us.

“The same thing we said earlier—kill Whateley and save the world,” Professor Armitage replied. “Each of these individuals possesses skills you might need. This group consists of a killer, a scholar, a wizard, someone familiar with the eldritch arts, a tracker, a scientist, and yourself. Combined, you might have a chance of stopping him.”

“*Might*?” Mercury asked.

“Might,” Professor Armitage said. “Professor Whateley knew things about space and time others could only dream about. He bound the spirit of a long-dead relative to himself and gained near deific-power manipulating both. He is still vulnerable to mortal weapons and attacks, but his strength is also well beyond what a normal human can possess.”

“What sort of allies does Whately have?” Thom asked, not bothering to look up from his book. He seemed to be flipping through it, his eyes scanning each page before moving to another.

“Professor Whateley tended to work alone,” Professor Armitage said. “He possesses the skill to summon and control creatures the same way Mister August does, however.”

“No one can do it like me,” August replied, cracking his knuckles.

“And we have no idea where he’s going?” Mercury asked.

Professor Armitage proceeded to conjure a manila folder, as if by magic (or was it “technology of the mind”?). “This is all of our

information on Mister Whateley, his research, and what people know of his departure."

Why did I not believe that? Oh right, I wasn't a moron. Still, I took the folder and spread its contents out on the table—black-and-white photos, documents, and maps that had large number of black X's on them. A cursory glance at the documents told me these were the locations that Marcus Whateley had investigated for insights into the Unimaginable Horror. I recognized several of them as places where antediluvian ruins had arisen from strange aeons. Interesting. Also, completely useless.

"We're not going to have any luck trying to decode what this asshole has been trying to solve for however long he's wanted to destroy the world from these," Mercury said, flipping through the file. "We need to find out where he is and where he's going."

"Wow, we never would have deduced that on our own, Red," Thom said, closing the book and putting it back on the shelf. Strangely, he was on the last page of it when he did so. "You've given us a real mind here, Professor."

"Fuck off," Mercury said.

"Rowr," Thom said, making a cat claw gesture. It was less effective than it might have once been because cats were considered lucky in the parts of the Wasteland I frequented.

"I don't suppose there's any chance the Yithians might expend their vast time-travel abilities to help us find the Unimaginable Horror's location?" I asked Armitage, looking through each of the papers.

"None," Professor Armitage said.

"These are all Elder Thing ruins," Mathew said, pointing at the locations marked on the map. "Whatever Marcus Whateley was searching for, it was among them."

My fist clenched at the mention of that hateful race I so loathed. I recognized, on some level, that my hatred was irrational. The death of Richard had been, in a world filled with deliberate murder, an accident brought about by misunderstanding. Yet when was murderous rage not irrational? What did I have left if not my capacity

for hatred? I hated the Elder Things because, guilt and anger at my friend's loss aside, it made me feel human.

"Elder Whatzit ruins?" Thom asked. "I swear to God, why can't things have normal names anymore?"

"What's normal?" August muttered, looking at a picture before handing it to me. "I grew up surrounded by demons and creatures with fifteen eyeballs."

It was a photo of Marcus Whateley standing next to Professor Armitage and August Bierce, all three of them dressed in white lab coats over very human attire. Marcus Whateley's must have been custom-stitched, because he towered over both men by six feet. His build was not thin, either, with broad shoulders and massive muscles that made him look like some sort of hulking juggernaut. Yet his face was not that of a brute but something much more mischievous. Goatish with thick, bushy eyebrows and a pointed chin covered in a beard, he was like something from Greek mythology. Marcus's satyr-like face belied eyes which were filled with intelligence and a barely-contained lust for life. While photos, rare as they were, were not windows to the soul, he didn't look like the sort of man who would want to extinguish all life on Earth. His eyes did not have the crushing depression and mad fury of a true zealot.

"How well did you know Marcus Whateley?" I asked, looking at August.

"Well," August said, pressing his fingertips together. "There was a time when I would have counted him among my closest friends. That was before our lives took us on different paths."

"You mean before he started worshiping monsters and trying to end the world?" Bobbie asked.

"An odd comment from a Deep One," August said. "Your people have spent your entire racial history doing both."

Bobbie stared at him. "I can't choose my family. I can choose to live a life free of the Great Old Ones."

It was a painfully naïve statement. None of us could live free of the Great Old Ones. I wasn't happy with this motley collection of murderers, thieves, and strangers, but it was a better group than I'd expected to have. If nothing else, all of them knew their way around

both a gun and the Wasteland. Jessica's presence was an unnecessary complication, but she was a professional who knew what she was doing. Once, I'd called her my best friend too. It was why her betrayal cut so keenly. Worse, I understood exactly why she'd done it and hated myself for not being able to forgive her. Fuck me, this was going to be an awkward trip. At least the world was going to end for the second time if we failed.

That took off some of the pressure.

Jessica proved her value seconds later. "I know where we can find an Elder Thing to ask what these ruins have in common."

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"In the Ghoul City of Shak'ta'hadron, beneath the Boston Ash Fields, they have an Elder Thing sage called the Keeper. It's old, even for one of their immortal kind, and the ghouls say it has access to the whole of the Elder Things' knowledge."

It was almost too good to be true. "How did you come by this knowledge?"

"Does it matter?" Jessica asked. Her expression surprised me. I was prepared for hatred and betrayal, not sadness mixed with regret.

"It gives us a place to start, at least," I said, putting the photo down.

"I will prepare your supplies," Professor Armitage said, nodding. He turned around and proceeded to walk away, disappearing as if he'd never been there.

"Assuming he doesn't destroy the world while we're journeying down to speak with the Dog Men," Thom replied.

"Assuming." It wasn't a good plan, but it was the only one we had.

That was when a beast from another dimension attacked and all hell broke loose.

Chapter Eight

All the evil in the universe was concentrated in the monster's lean, hungry body. Or did it even *have* a body? I had seen a lot of inexplicable shit in my time as a Ranger and caravan guard, but this terrified me beyond reason. I also recognized it from the mad descriptions of such creatures in the *Re'Kithnid*.

It was a Hound of Tindalos, monsters who hunted the living through the angles of time and space. The Hounds of Tindalos were creatures consisting of living geometry. I do not mean to say their bodies were angular, for this would give you the wrong impression.

If one *were* trying to picture it, they could do worse than a hunting dog made of a million separate mirrored squares linked together by some invisible force. The pieces of its body constantly shifted position and size while maintaining the same general shape. This does not convey what the creature truly looked like, but when dealing with my increasingly inhuman perceptions, it's the closest an earthly language can convey.

The thing appeared above our heads and landed on the table, causing it to split into dozens of pieces spread across the floor. Its first attack was beyond lethal, striking not at a man's flesh and bone but the spaces between his cells. I know this because poor Mathew, one of the few remaining well-educated men in the world, was struck by the creature before we could react. His head, arms, and legs fell into hundreds of perfectly cubed pieces on the floor. I could not fathom the kind of strike that could inflict such a perfect death.

"Hit the floor!" Jessica shouted, falling to the ground. Others pulled away from the table or threw themselves to the ground. None of these individuals would have survived so long as they had if not for their ability to get away from the monsters that preyed on humanity.

"Where are our weapons!" Thom shouted, running to the side and pushing over a library shelf onto the creature. The shelf exploded into hundreds of papers and pieces of wood, flying in every direction.

The Hound let out an inhuman screech, half animal call, half shout from another dimension. That sound penetrated my soul and was as loud as the cry of a beast a hundred times its size. I would have covered my ears to drown out the hellish cacophony, but was too busy aiming my gun at it.

I was out of orihalcum ammunition but fired anyway, the bullets disappearing into the gaps between the monster's angles. They ricocheted and bounced around the library about us.

"Put that away!" Thom cried out.

"Have you got any better ideas?" I shouted, ceasing my attack anyway.

The Hound's tail pulled back as if to strike them, only for the back end to disappear and then reappear behind Thom.

"Behind you!" I shouted.

Thom hit the ground as the monster's tail shot over his head. The creature was able to stretch its impossible body in directions beyond anything I'd seen in the Wasteland. Thom rolled to the side as the squares making up the tail separated and fell down on the ground like knives, trying but failing to impale him.

"Nodens, I call upon your power to protect me! I'phek Re'Kithnid K'a!" Bobbie shouted, waving her hand around in the air before, much to my surprise, a flaming whip appeared inside her hand. As she cracked it against the Hound of Tindalos, the creature let forth another inhuman cry. This one, however, was a screech of pain.

I hoped.

August, meanwhile, had moved a safe distance away. Making a series of strange hand gestures, he shouted to Mercury, "Do you know the Breath of Ithaqua?"

"Yes!" Mercury shouted, hiding behind another shelf. My lover was already preparing another spell, having ignored my request not to study sorcery beyond banishment and protection spells.

"Then let us strike with it!" August cried out, trying to rally his courage.

The Hound, however, had other ideas. Hit repeatedly by Bobbie's flaming whip, which seemed to draw the creature's angles together rather than separate them, the creature split into a hundred different

shards before they vanished. Then the Hound appeared right behind her.

I charged forward but was unable to keep the creature from slashing across her chest and taking three square ribbons out of it before it leapt at my throat. I threw my arm in front of my face and the massive creature landed on me. The Hound slashed its claws and gnashed its jaws against my arm, biting, snapping, and howling, but the monster didn't tear through me as with Mathew. I felt tremendous pain, but the claws on my arm and chest were no worse than any other animal attack. Though the Hound of Tindalos had no recognizable expressions, its next cry sounded frustrated and confused.

The creature might not have experienced anything like a human being, but I suspected it was in anything but a good mood when Jessica smashed it across the face with a table leg she'd broken off. Momentum, more than force, sent the creature flying off me. It disappeared in midair and reappeared right side up, once more ready for battle. That was when Thom smashed a chair over its head like we were having a bar fight in a saloon rather than a battle with an otherworldly horror. The Hound turned its head toward him, making a hissing noise. That reaction, at least, was unmistakable.

"Nice doggie," Thom muttered, wincing and backing away.

The monster opened its mouth, which expanded to a size capable of swallowing Thom whole, and its entire body seemed to shake. Alien words filled the air, seeming to disrupt reality with their presence. A miniature twister caused the bookshelves around us to blow over as books went flying. Mystical energies ran thick and cool around us, easier to access in this strange place than cursed Earth.

Mercury and August were casting their spell together, their voices speaking in unison. "Na'ck thul nu'll al'zul Ithaqua! Mock'thall Mock'thall ck'eb Ithaqua ner'zhul kabthan!"

The temperature dropped to freezing levels around us while the Hound of Tindalos grew more and more physical substance. I speculate, now that I have a moment to think about it, that the creature existed in multiple points of time at once. Moving through

time was as easy to it as a fish swimming downstream, and presence in a single point of time was painful.

“Ithaqua mock’thul akrthas khack-mul za!” August and Mercury continued their chant. Every utterance of the magic spell tortured the Hound, the creature seeming almost of this Earth when it began glowing with Saint Elmo’s fire.

Its claws and mouth clenched, but it made a low chuckling noise from every part of the library around us.

“Yeah, that’s not good,” Thom said, having taken a table leg off the floor.

“Argh!” August hissed, a glowing angle shooting from the Hound’s side and going through his stomach out the other side.

“No!” Mercury said. The spell ended as yet another square struck her in the hand, causing blood to pour onto the floor.

The Hound growled, looking more menacing than ever. The library’s ambient light dimmed as it continued to grow brighter. Soon, everything was dark in the room except for the blazing-white inferno of the Hound. Its squares started to separate, bit by bit, and I knew we were going to die. So I charged and grabbed it by the throat, slamming its head into the strange matter floor and walls around me with my right hand. The creature was so surprised by my sudden action that it did not react as I concentrated and sought the impossible moments of time all around us. Then I fed the Hound to them.

Like a piece of meat thrown in a grinder, the Hound of Tindalos was crushed under the weight of dimensions beyond pressed on top of one another. I’d chosen a space that bent upon itself for infinity, and while it can travel through the angles about us, curves seemed to cause it immense pain. I don’t know where the knowledge came from, but I calculate the Hound was broken under the force of a thousand micro-singularities.

The Eyes of Yog-Sothoth hooted and hollered from their place beyond our universe, finding my destruction of the Hound to be the height of comedy. I could no longer see them, but instead saw another world. Images of a boiling sea world and cities of strange geometry filled my head like memories of a distant past. I fell back

on my ass, stunned by the sight I'd witnessed through the dimensional barriers, which were paper thin in this place. I'd seen some seriously messed-up shit in my time ranging from a color from outer space, a mass sacrifice of children to create an artificial paradise for their spirits, and a tower of Elder Things in the Dreamlands. Seeing the world was full of terrible things just one frequency of reality over and that I had some link to them was almost one revelation too many.

"Did you see any of that?" I asked, wondering how it had appeared to them. My eyes were apparently monster eyes now, perceiving the world in a way unlike the way of humans. I wished to God I could pluck them out, but I needed them if I was going to plug Whateley.

"You just stuck the demon-dog thing into the white-space around me, then withdrew your hand. It was gone," Mercury said, looking at me in mixed fear and wonder.

"I guess that arm is useful for something after all," Jessica said, trying to make a joke and failing badly.

I looked down to my right arm. Its illusion was now broken, having returned to its previous horrific state. "Fuck."

"Well, good job anyway. Want to share how you killed it?" Thom asked, waving his makeshift club as if it was dangerous.

I looked at the club's round base and made a guess as to why it worked when so much else didn't. "Curves. The Hounds hate curves."

Thom blinked. "Curves."

"They are as unsettling to them as its universe would be to you … us." I tried to imagine what it was like for a creature of a purely flat universe or a million more dimensions than me coming into our world and what a terrible experience that would be. It would be like a fish coming up from the depths of Cthulhu's grave to explode when it reached the surface, all that pressure and water around it being necessary for its survival. It almost made me feel sorry for the varmint.

Almost.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” Thom started looking around for round objects to arm himself.

“Curves, right,” Mercury said, going to the side of the fallen August. Mercury was trained as a medical doctor and might be able to save one of our two patients. Except it didn’t prove necessary.

Much to my surprise, August sat up, and not only did the terrible hole in his stomach seal over, but his gray and tattered robes also knit over the now-healed wound. Even the stains from his blood disappeared, making me wonder at his robes’ dilapidated state.

“A useful tidbit of lore,” August said, dusting himself off. “I was about ready to summon something bigger and nastier to eat it—which might have compounded our problems—but I’m glad that didn’t prove necessary.”

“We need to exchange notes,” Mercury said, looking hungry. August had the real magic, not this ‘technology of the mind’ business, and I knew my lover would latch onto him like a tick until she sucked him dry. Which perhaps wasn’t the most flattering of descriptions to apply to the woman you loved, but it was accurate.

August smiled. “I’ll teach you, perhaps, little witch—provided you come up with something interesting to offer me. Sadly, you’re not my type.”

“I’ll try and hide my disappointment.” Mercury rolled her eyes. “I’m many things, but not a whore.”

“Then you haven’t been offered enough,” Thom said, tempting me to punch him. “Everyone has their price. Look at us.”

Jessica was at the side of Bobbie Merriweather. Contrary to what I’d expected after all the rumors of her newfound devotion to human purity, she seemed to be trying to help the Deep One hybrid. I didn’t think there was anything she could do. Bobbie had a brutal series of cuts across her chest, and they would have been fatal to a human.

But she wasn’t human.

“Get away,” Bobbie said, clutching her wounds closed. “I was born from the womb of Mother Hydra. These scratches will be healed in minutes.”

I questioned how that worked, since it looked like her hands were all that was keeping her intestines from falling out from her body. Yet

despite this, she stood up and the wounds were already starting to look like scratches.

“Huh,” Thom said, looking at her. “I’ve killed plenty of Deep Ones over the years. None of them could do that. You must be a double freak.”

Jessica glared. “Knock it off, asshole.”

“I owe the Captain and you guys my life. So, I suppose I can. Consider my lips sealed about you all being unnatural abominations.” Thom shrugged, then made a key-turning gesture in front of his mouth. “You realize Professor Asshole summoned this thing to kill us, right?”

“What?” Mercury said, turning her head. “Why the hell would he do that?”

“The man’s been giving me the stink eye since I got here, and I was the first. He treated everyone who came into this place as little better than rats in his walls. He led us to this kooky place and left right before things went south,” Thom said, counting off events on his fingers. “Need I remind you, if not for the fact that three of you are wizards and one a mutant, we’d be screwed every which way from Sunday.”

“I am distressed to find myself agreeing with Mister Braddock,” August said, frowning. “Professor Armitage has always been an isolationist. He also possesses the power to summon and control a creature from the Many-Angled Place. It’s possible he thought pre-emptively eliminating us was the right decision.”

“So, let’s shoot the bastard,” Jessica said.

Thom shook his table leg at us. “I suggest we play nice, get our weapons back, and *then* kill this bastard.”

“And lose what we were promised?” Bobbie said, almost healed. “Fuck that.”

Thom shook his head. “We keep our deal with the Yith. If they wanted to kill us, they wouldn’t need to invent a story about the last imprisoned Great Old One struggling to get out. I believe this Whateley is a threat to this planet, and last I checked, we live here. I also want my brother back. We just need to kill Armitage quiet-like and make sure he doesn’t come back.”

I hated that we lived in a world where making sure an enemy stayed dead was a concern. “Before we start plotting murder, we might want to determine whether or not he’s the party responsible.”

“And how would you suggest we do that?” Thom asked, glaring at me.

“You could ask me,” Professor Armitage said, standing behind him.

Despite defending him, I wanted to quick draw on him and put him down. Alas, I didn’t have the will or the weapons.

“Dammit,” Thom muttered, turning around. “You have a lot of explaining to do.”

“No,” Professor Armitage intoned. “I don’t.”

I pointed at the gory remains of Mathew. “Tell him that.”

August shrugged. “I can bring him back.”

“Leave the dead in peace,” Jessica snapped. “I’ve seen what kind of things you wizards return to life.”

August was nonplussed. “Just making an offer.”

Thom, meanwhile, looked intrigued.

“I returned minutes ago,” Professor Armitage said. “I sensed the leak in the barriers and was reinforcing them. Marcus Whateley must have been undermining our library’s protections to observe us. When he saw you, he undoubtedly sent the Hound.”

“Why not send it when you were here?” Thom asked.

“Because I would have killed it,” Professor Armitage replied. “Obviously.”

What a smug asshole.

“Why should we believe you?” Bobbie asked, looking at her blood-soaked clothes in disgust. She wasn’t paying much attention to our conversation. I wondered what she had been bribed with to make her so unconcerned with treachery.

“Because if I wanted to kill you, I’d just do this,” Professor Armitage said, lifting his crystal staff.

“Wait,” I started to say, but a flash of light consumed us and the seven of us found ourselves in a darkened underground garage. Gray-robed figures were loading up supplies into vehicles all around

us. He'd shifted us through space. Again. I was getting really sick of that.

"Except I'd have dumped you into a volcano, or space, or the space between dreams," Professor Armitage said.

"How powerful *is* that thing?" Mercury asked, staring at the rod.

"Very," August said, unimpressed. "Which is why I'm getting mine back."

"You could have asked for forgiveness for your many crimes," Professor Armitage said, staring at him.

"That would require my caring about what the University thinks of me," August replied.

"Your supplies are being readied," Professor Armitage said, not even bothering to gesture. "You must leave within the hour."

Thom looked outraged. So was I. "After all you put us through—"

Mercury grabbed my left hand, calming me.

Professor Armitage's next words silenced us all. "Professor Whateley has been spotted in a town called Insmaw to the North. You can catch him if you reach him before the next two days have passed. The Great One's time sense is blocked past this point—which probably means that is when the world will end."

This day just kept getting better and better.

Chapter Nine

“So, the world is going to end in a week? Can you be a little more precise?” I asked, deciding exactitude was in our best interests. “I’d hate to miss the deadline by an hour or two because I was watering the horses.”

“Nine days, in all likelihood. The time fluctuates, I’m sorry to say,” Professor Armitage said, looking among us. “The Great Race could once travel to the far future, but it is now impossible. Our lost brethren in the future may or may not still exist.”

Curious how he referred to the Yithians in the far future as his brethren. That wasn’t a concern, however, with fate now against us.

Mercury then pointed out a flaw in my logic. “So, the future can be changed? It had to be if your people in the future aren’t there anymore.”

“Time can only change at the behest of the Great Old Ones and Other Gods,” Professor Armitage replied. “They alone can alter causality.”

“The Elder Gods are more powerful than both,” Bobbie replied, making a four-armed star sign over her heart.

“Believe what you will,” Professor Armitage said. “What I have said is the truth and you must make haste to Insmaw.”

I’d heard of Insmaw. Centuries ago, in the Pre-Rising era, the United States government had discovered the existence of the Deep One race in the town of Innsmouth, Massachusetts. Per the records my ancestors uncovered in the ruins of the United States Air Force base that New Arkham was built on, Innsmouth had been one of many seaside communities subverted by the Deep Ones so they could shore up their decaying genetic code. The townsfolk converted to Cthulhu worship, knowing him as Dagon, and created syncretic Christian-Cthulhean rites which gave rise to the original Esoteric Order of Dagon. The United States government of the early twentieth century reacted poorly to paganism and even worse to whites breeding with other races (let alone non-humans), so they’d

gathered up the hybrids of the town and subjected them to unspeakable experiments.

When the Rising occurred, the survivors escaped their desert concentration camps and returned to re-establish their former home. It hadn't gone well, since humanity's survivors, as well as their former Deep One masters, considered the Innsmouth hybrids to be degenerates. Some, like the inbred Marsh family, had gone to Kingsport to form the Deep One community there, while others, like Bobbie's family, rebuilt the aforementioned Esoteric Order of Dagon. A small few, however, founded a new town. No one had heard of any violence, racially motivated or otherwise, from Insmaw, and that was rare enough. Indeed, all I'd heard about the folk there was they were pleasant but isolationist. What did Whateley want from such a place? Even more pressing, what had he gotten?

"Teleport us there, Chief, and we'll kill the bastard," Thom said, looking uncomfortable with his surroundings.

"I *can't*." Professor Armitage gritted his teeth.

"Can't or won't?" I asked, getting annoyed with his doublespeak.

"Can't. Before you, against the Great One's will, I sent fourteen acolytes to intercept Whateley," Professor Armitage said, his face scrunching up with a mixture of guilt and remorse. It was the first real sign of any emotion other than disdain. "They did not complete the transition due to a barrier Whateley erected. What came back was a jumble of their organs and bones in still-living pools of biological atrocity." He paused. "They did not live long, thankfully."

"Tsk-tsk-tsk," August said, shaking his head. "Disobeying your masters, Harvey? Shameful."

The Professor looked ready to punch him. "You speak of things you know nothing about, August. I'm trying to save the human race."

"Then stop getting in our way," August said, earning him my respect.

"This mission just keeps getting better and better," Jessica muttered under her breath.

"You must travel by ground," Professor Armitage said. "We will equip you with whatever charms or spells are required to hide you from Whateley's divinations."

“Divinations, charms, and spells?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “So much for technology of the mind.” It was a cheap shot, but Armitage had it coming.

August chortled behind me. “I’m starting to like you, Booth.”

“Thank you.”

“Even if you are a filthy mutant,” August added, his voice not wavering in the slightest.

I debated killing the rest of my partners when this was over. “We’ll need maps, charts, gold, a new illusion to cover my arm, weapons, and a selection from books in your library.”

“Planning to do some light reading on your way?” Thom asked. “Because maybe we should be focusing on the end of the world.”

“I can do both,” I replied.

Since I doubted Professor Armitage would be forthcoming with any further information, our best chance of getting information was to avail ourselves to the University’s library. I intended to ask August what sort of books would help the most as I suspected he would be all too eager to betray his former brethren—even if he was a jackass.

“I have already sealed away the Hinton Library for the safety of my people. Access to its knowledge is temporarily offline,” Professor Armitage said. “You’ll have to make do—”

“I am not concerned with the safety of your people,” I said, cutting him off. “I’m concerned with the safety of the world.”

Professor Armitage opened his mouth to protest before slumping his shoulders. “You will have whatever you need.”

“Thank you,” I said. “We’ll also need new clothes. Mercury and I didn’t get a chance to pack, after all.”

Mercury snorted behind me.

The professor turned to walk away. He would bring us what we needed, though. We were the last hope humanity had. Small Gods of the Earth help us all.

“That was amusing,” August said, chortling. “You know, Harvey used to be able to laugh.”

“I find that difficult to believe,” I said.

“He seems like he was born with a stick up his ass,” Mercury said. “I was kind of hoping I’d left those people behind when I left New

Arkham."

August smirked. "You never leave behind smug superiority."

"He murdered our friends and co-workers," I said coldly. "Slaughtered them when all he had to do was approach us and ask us to come with him."

August closed his eyes. "I wouldn't be surprised if he'd hoped to kill you so the Great One wouldn't be able to finish bringing together this little fellowship."

"Why?" I asked. "What does he get out of the world being destroyed?"

"Assuming it will be," August said. "I'm not so sure since one more Great Old One doesn't seem like it would make much difference. I think Marcus is less enamored of the Great One than he lets on. Marcus was a far smarter man than either Armitage or I as well as being directly plugged into the nature of the universe. If he thinks releasing this monster will do some good, then he might be onto something."

"The Great One says Marcus is trying to mercy kill humanity," I pointed out.

"Such a trustworthy fellow, the Great One," August said, his voice low and contemptuous. "I'm sure you've picked up on that."

"I have. What's your opinion of the Great Race?" I asked, wanting a second opinion.

"There was a Pre-Rising scholar named Richard Dawkins who had some interesting ideas about evolutionary biology. Summarized, every species will act with motivation to benefit itself and the propagation of its genes over all other concerns. I believe this holds true even with races as strange as the Yith." August narrowed his eyes. "They'll help us as long as we're useful. However, I trust them to do what's best for themselves."

"Like humans," I said.

"Exactly," August said, sighing. "It's a good thing so many species can breed with us, or at least lay their eggs in us, or we'd have been long ago wiped out. Genetics is all about making sure your legacy is what survives, screw everyone else."

A part of me was deeply troubled by that analogy. I was a monster but I maintained very human needs. Was there some greater plan from the monster inside me? A creature that wanted to breed with humanity so to make a race of hybrids? It was an insane thought but this was an insane world. Certainly, the ghouls' and Deep Ones' masters had made them take human husband and wives. I also had two children who did not know about their inhuman heritage even as they were possibly changing into something horrible—or were as human as anyone. It was my greatest shame I'd never told them. Yet, the Yith didn't take consorts from among the human race. There was only one member of their species in the underground beneath Miskatonic University and he (it?) was ill-equipped for cosmic miscegenation.

"But the Yith don't have bodies," Mercury pointed out. "They're just psychic entities wearing organic flesh."

"Which means we have no idea what motivates them," August countered. "Their most fundamental drives are different."

"I see." I thought about that. "That's less than comforting."

In the end, I decided not to focus on the bigger picture. Despite my claim of not being an assassin, I'd killed people for far worse reasons than regaining my humanity. I'd do anything to be able to hold Mercury in my arms as a man, to sire human children, and to live a normal life. If I could cure myself then I could cure my biological son and daughter. I could possibly even cure—

"Da!" I heard a child's voice fill the chamber. It was a voice that seemed to mock my worries.

"Jackie," I muttered. "They've already brought you here."

A twelve-year-old girl with long red hair formed into ringlets, pale skin, and prominent canines had come into the room past the University's personnel. She was dressed in a century-old black t-shirt marked "Arkham Witch" and jean-shorts I'd found last month wrapped in plastic on a scavenging run. The girl navigated around the many individuals moving around the garage with natural grace before coming to my side.

"Hey, Ma," Jackie said, waving to her.

Her appearance here was so surprising, I didn't know how to react. She'd changed a great deal from the emancipated waif we'd found a year ago, in the village of Scrapyard. Under Mercury's care, the ghoul-human hybrid had put on considerable muscle and was quite tall for her age. Indeed, an outsider might be forgiven if they thought she was a girl of fifteen or sixteen.

I suspected Jackie would continue to grow exponentially, as hybrids tended to be of large proportions. I was glad to see her, despite wondering how she'd gotten here, and her appearance did much to calm the darkness in my heart.

Mercury walked up to her and gave her a big hug. "You are not allowed to grow while I'm away!"

Jackie rolled her eyes, disliking being treated as a child. "Get used to it. I'm taller than you now."

"That's not a great accomplishment," I muttered.

Mercury shot me a glare.

"Sorry," I said, raising my left hand in surrender.

Jackie turned to me, looked at my right arm as if to check my condition's progress, gave me a warm smile, and hugged me. Jackie was the one person I knew that didn't flinch at my physical transformation. She understood it was a source of considerable discomfort, was something I considered a mortal illness, and encouraged me to find a cure, but I doubted the girl ever understood how it made me feel.

I shook my head. "How did you get here? We left you a hundred miles away."

"More," Jackie said. "Professor Armitage came to me first and said you were going to be here. I was wondering when you'd arrive."

I grimaced. If she'd been taken before our capture, Jackie was an unwitting hostage. Best not to let her know that; her cooperation would be the best defense she had. "I see."

"You're going to study here!" Mercury said, smiling.

"I am?" Jackie asked.

I did not like this, but there was a limit to what I could do. "Yes, I believe you'll like it here. They're very … unconventional."

“It means they won’t kill you for being a ghoul,” Thom said from behind. He was checking out one of the cars the University was providing us.

“This conversation is none of your concern,” I said to him.

“I don’t give a shit about your little monster family,” Thom muttered, opening up its hood to fiddle around within.

“Hey, Pup,” Jessica waved to Jackie. “Long time no see.”

“Hi, Jessica,” Jackie said, ignoring my response. “It’s good to see you again. Killed any evil wizards lately?”

Mercury looked surprised at Jackie’s pleasant response.

“A few,” Jessica replied. “We’re off to kill another one.”

Jackie nodded, a somber expression on her face. “Good. Don’t get killed.”

“I’ll try,” Jessica said.

I was surprised by Jackie’s friendliness to Jessica. I’d made no secret of how each of us had tried to kill the other. Then again, perhaps Jackie was smarter than I was and knew about my suicidal thoughts. I’d all but dared Jessica to try and kill me at times. It was also possible that as a true child of the Wasteland, she didn’t think trying to kill a person was a reason to end a friendship.

I still remembered our naked forms entwined together on the ancient decayed mattress of the upstairs bed in the two-story scrap metal house Mercury and I lived in. Jessica and I had never been lovers before that night, so I should have been suspicious when she’d come to lie with me while Mercury was away.

It hadn’t been adultery, though I’d been guilty of plenty of that during my first marriage, as monogamy had never been an expectation with Mercury. She’d been with other men and women as part of her liberation from a hideous marriage to a New Arkham man decades her senior. Hell, back when I was still human-seeming, we’d made regular visits together to the closest brothel.

Still, I’d felt guilty finally touching Jessica in the way I’d dreamed about for years. It had been a respite from the horrors of my advancing mutation and made me feel human in a way I hadn’t since Mercury had decided not to carry our child to term. I’d fallen asleep, only to be awoken by the sounds of her moving around the room.

Followed by the orihalcum bullets she'd put in me from the foot of the bed. I could have forgiven her trying to kill me. I couldn't forgive her making me feel loved first.

"Booth—" Jessica started to speak.

"Not now," I said, my voice cold. I didn't say not ever, though.

Jessica looked down.

Mercury, meanwhile, chose to focus on other matters. "I want you to take care of yourself, Jackie. Don't get into any relationships until you're at least fifteen, and if anyone hits on you because you look older, tell me so we can kill them."

"Ma—" Jackie started to say.

"Don't ma me," Mercury said, biting her lip. Her expression changed, becoming serious. "I'm not always going to be around here and training you to be a doctor is the one decent thing I've done. Take what you've learned and use it to make the world a better place."

Jackie realized she was serious. It wasn't as if she knew we'd survived no less than two attempts by extra-dimensional monsters to kill us and were on our way to probably get horrifically killed by one of the Great Old Ones. She sensed something was off, however, because she said, "Are you leaving me, Ma?"

Mercury shook her head. "No, my dear, but Booth made a decision to get you a place here so you were secure and safe."

"I won't change for another ten years," Jackie said. "I'm safe among the Kingsport folk."

"They're murderers and thieves," I said.

"And these people ain't?" Jackie asked, looking between me. "Did you negotiate a place for yourself?"

I grimaced. "No."

"Did he ask you?" Jackie turned to Mercury.

"Err," Mercury fumbled for something to say. "It was kind of a spur-of-the-moment decision but that doesn't mean—"

"So, just pack off the ghoul girl, eh?" Jackie said, glaring. "That how it is."

Jackie was certainly acting like a fifteen-year-old.

“That’s not it,” I said. “I want you to be safe in case something happens to us.”

“There’s nowhere safe,” Jackie said, growling before walking off. “Excuse me, I need to go talk to my new owners.”

Jessica watched her depart, then went after her.

I blinked. “That could have gone better.”

“Ya think?” Mercury muttered. “Worse, we don’t have time to fix it.”

No, we didn’t.

But I decided to try.

Chapter Ten

I walked down the halls of Miskatonic University's lone functioning above-ground building, which was primarily a garage and storage area from what I could observe. The windows were all boarded up and there was electrical lighting spread throughout, but I could sense an air of apprehension as I passed by rooms where people worked on assembling machine parts for their transports.

It might have been Marcus's treason or the presence of outsiders, but I suspected there was something else to it. A look at them constantly fidgeting and staring at the windows as well as ceiling, I got the impression they were upset about being above ground. They'd become used to the claustrophobic environment below.

I wasn't interested in them, though. Instead I focused on finding Jackie to explain my reasoning for wanting her to be here. Truth be told, I wasn't sure why I'd been so insistent on getting her a life here given that I trusted the University's residents about as far as I could throw them. Actually, depending on which arm I used, I could probably throw them pretty far, so I trusted them much less.

I forced those thoughts away and continued onward after Jackie and Jessica. I confess, it surprised me that Mercury didn't follow, but it was probably a good thing she was distracting Professor Armitage and the others. This entire venture, which had begun with murder and would almost certainly end with it, was getting worse every minute.

I didn't know if our ragtag band of outlaws was supposed to succeed in finding Marcus Whateley, but I intended to make a game effort of it. If nothing else, I wanted to know whether or not the scattered few survivors of the Earth's races were really in danger or if it was just an extra means of motivating us.

I could tell you, I heard the distant whisper of Nyarlathotep in my ear. *You'd have to believe I'm always with you*, *though*.

I'm hallucinating you, nothing more, I said. The gods of the Dreamlands have better things to do than harass mere mortals.

That's the benefit of being infinite, *John*, Nyarlathotep chuckled. *I can be with everyone and everything*.

Lies.

If you wish.

My denial was a weak defense, and I thought about how Mercury might react to the knowledge that not only was I transforming in terms of my physical body, but also mentally. I was haunted by visions of Azathoth's court, the strange creatures that existed beyond the paper-thin walls of reality, and occasionally the words of the Other Gods' messenger. Nyarlathotep was the Son to Azathoth's Father and Yog-Sothoth's Holy Spirit. Ever since my branding with his sign and my summoning him in the Dreamlands, I was linked to him, and he seemed all too eager to comment on my accursed situation. Assuming any of it was real at all and not just my hallucinating.

Everything you can dream is real. It is the belief you can escape those dreams to reality that is the illusion.

Then Nyarlathotep's voice was gone and I was once more alone with my thoughts.

For the moment.

I found Jackie and Jessica in a room full of old boxes, scrap, and machinery a few minutes later. Jackie was sitting in a corner talking to the woman I had once called friend and was doing my very best to hate. Jessica had her arm around Jackie and I was reminded of better times, times when our artificial family wasn't at each other's throats.

As if to underscore my weakening sanity, I was no longer inside Miskatonic University's crumbling ruins. Instead, I found myself under the blazing blue sun of the Earth as a dozen tents and stands stood around me. I had stepped several months into the past, when the Carnevil had shown up outside of the Kingsport.

The Carnevil was perhaps the world's last circus and contained performers, captured monsters, gladiators, and games for those who were willing to indulge them. For a populace jaded by causal horrors and monsters, it was a source of unusual horrors and creatures. Mutants, obscenities, and farces all for a piece of copper or steel. I'd

heard some nasty rumors about the strange collection of entertainers from witch-haunted Salem, but if I believed every sordid tale of missing children or murder then no one would be innocent.

Besides, Jackie had wanted to go.

Stunned by my sudden change of circumstances, I saw the quartet of myself, Jackie, Jessica, and Mercury moving down the path between two shooting galleries and the haunted house. Ducking behind a booth where one bobbed for apples in exchange for five pieces, I tried to guess whether or not this was a hallucination.

And failed.

The memory I saw from an outsider's perspective was as crisp and perfect as if it were really happening, but that meant nothing from an alien mind that was somehow linked to the ups and downs of time. Was I simply looking back on my past, or was I able to move, like Yog-Sothoth, back and forth through time? I suspected the answer, like so much in this world, was whatever was most horrifying.

Still, I watched.

"I remember this day," I muttered.

The quartet were in front of a plastic duck pond and I got a good look at them. I wore a duster and Stetson, so did Jessica, while Mercury wore a white dress and headscarf with shaded glasses. Jackie had on a pair of faded shorts, a patched t-shirt, and a headband. She was reading a nearly pristine comic book I'd recovered from a Boston ruin. It depicted a black-robed wizard of some kind and a vampiress fighting a gigantic eye with multiple tentacles. The comic was called MERCILESS: THE SUPERVILLAIN WITHOUT MERCY and had been published sometime in the 1960s.

"Enjoying your book?" my other self asked, uninterested in the sequential art.

"Yeah," Jackie said. "Though I was wondering why all of the aliens look human."

"Humanity didn't know what aliens looked like back then," Mercury said. "Real aliens have nothing in common with people from Earth."

Jackie blinked. “Then how do so many alien-human hybrids exist? I mean, John has child—”

My other self coughed. “Perhaps you shouldn’t bring that up.”

Jackie frowned and looked at her comic. “People were a lot more tolerant in the old days. The guy in the comics had an alien ex-girlfriend.”

Mercury and I exchanged a look before I looked away. I still had faith my human side would triumph back then. It was still months of failure and increasing growth from the horror bound to me. Months that would slowly wear away any hope I had of being anything other than another creature preying on mankind.

I still had hope then.

“So, you want to get some cotton candy?” my other self asked.

“You shouldn’t give her anything but a bullet to the head,” a gruff growling voice spoke nearby.

My family turned to address the voice. It came from a thick, square Caucasian man with most of his hair lost from M-Rads in the Wasteland. He was dressed in a thick coat, ammo belt, and two large pistols by his side. Beside him was a lanky tall man of Indian descent who was carrying a rifle. The latter had his cheeks badly deformed from a bullet that had luckily passed through the sides of his mouth, hitting nothing important.

“Excuse me, sir?” my other self asked.

“I can smell the monster on her,” the Caucasian man said. “She has no place here among human children.”

Jessica’s hand moved down to her pistol while I could tell Mercury had a spell on her lips. My other self placed my hands in front of both and shook his head. “Not here.”

“You are mistaken, sir,” my other self said. The other John did not want a fight and was trying to avoid killing more people. It was a way to keep a hold on his humanity. A noble but futile endeavor. There was a practical element to it, too, though. None of us wanted to offend the Carnevil’s owners or disrupt Jackie’s day.

“I know monsters,” the Caucasian man said. “I know those who bring them here are monsters.”

“Do you want us to leave?” Jessica asked.

“I want you to—” the Caucasian man started to say, reaching for his gun.

“How much?” my other self asked, the threat of murdering my daughter obliterating any of my earlier hesitation about killing them.

“What?” the Caucasian man stopped.

“How much to just go?” I said. “We have gold.”

The Caucasian man and his Indian friend exchanged a glance. “Everything you got.”

My other self nodded and gestured to a nearby tent.

They followed.

He nodded to Jessica.

I remembered we’d murdered them there, stored the bodies, and paid a price to a ghoul who was working behind the scenes.

Jackie hadn’t felt like playing at the carnival afterward.

A second later and I was once more in the present, staring down at those two. It was a reminder of just how far I’d fallen. I didn’t regret having murdered the two weasels, but I knew it had been my own self-hatred that had driven Jessica to do what she’d done. Jessica would have stood by me through the change even if it had gotten her killed. Instead, she’d thought she’d been doing me a favor by trying to give me the mercy kill I wanted but stubborn pride kept me from asking for. Walking down the basement steps, I approached them both.

“John, this—” Jessica started to say.

“Give me a moment with her,” I said.

“John—” Jessica said.

“Please.” I closed my eyes. “We’ll talk later.”

I remembered her soft touch and the feel of her body against mine. Jessica and I had been friends for a very long time, almost siblings, but I’d always wondered what it would be like to be with her. Now our friendship was as much ruined by that as by her betrayal. I hated her, wanted her, resented her, and missed her all in one go. There was also the fact that the monster inside me was like much of the Mythos and craved physical contact. I feared it wanted to take her and Mercury to sire a host of monsters. I feared it had done the same with my children back in New Arkham whom I had never

contacted to inform of their dark true nature. Maybe the transformation wouldn't affect them without the Hand of Nyarlathotep branded to their shoulders, or maybe it would skip a few generations.

Either way, I was a coward.

Jessica looked down, then exchanged a look with Jackie. "All right."

My ex-partner walked past me and I didn't have the decency to look her in the eye.

When she'd left the room, Jackie looked up to me. "You should really forgive her, Pa."

"It's complicated, Jackie," I said.

"You mean because you fucked her and she tried to kill you?" Jackie asked.

I frowned, noting she was a more observant girl than I'd given her credit for. "You shouldn't use that sort of language, Jackie. Your Old Pa wouldn't have approved."

"My Old Pa also said not to whore, drink, or kill people, which you and Mercury do all the time. I have dog ears; I'm always hearing things from your bedroom which would make the people of my hometown blush."

I grimaced. "I actually don't drink anymore. I can drink paint thinner without being poisoned."

"Not really a defense, Pa."

She had a point there.

I looked away. "I don't forgive easily."

"Is it so bad being a monster?" Jackie asked. "You always tell me not to be ashamed, but I know you hate what you are."

I grimaced, knowing how hypocritical I was being. "It's not the physical changes I fear, Jackie. It's the mental. I know ghouls and they are a decent, if slightly peculiar, race. I do not know what I am becoming, but it terrifies me it is not the kind of thing that would recognize you and the others of my family."

I was lying about the physical changes not frightening me, but that didn't make the rest of my statement untrue. I had a hideous vision in my head of metamorphosing into something horrifying that would kill those I loved.

“Maybe you won’t,” Jackie said. “Maybe you won’t randomly start worshiping Azathoth and Nyarlathotep or Yoggy-Sathoth. Maybe you’ll just be you.”

I was tempted to tell her that I already heard from Nyarlathotep on a regular basis. That he was the angel and demon on my shoulder. That I did worship that Dark Trinity, Cthulhu, and other gods in my dreams even as I held to the Old Gods of Earth in my waking hours.

“Maybe I would be,” I lied.

“Why are you abandoning me here, Pa?” Jackie said. “What did I do?”

“We’re not abandoning you,” I said. “We would never abandon you.”

“You leave me alone in the city when you go caravanning now. I run the shop just fine.”

I grimaced, really disliking how this conversation kept turning against me. The truth was we’d only just started leaving Jackie alone after her latest growth spurt. Some of the men in the caravan had determined she was old enough to lie with and either wanted to buy or take her. “It was complicated.”

“You decided I was safer back in a city of horse thieves and murderers versus with you, two people who’d kill anyone who touched me.”

I frowned. “You’re really highlighting that I’m a shit parent.”

“Not a shit parent, but a bit challenged.”

I gave short chuckle. “The answer is I didn’t want you to see me when I finally became the creature that might not recognize you. I feel like I’m dying, Jackie, a little at a time. I want you taken care of. They’d accept Mercury here as well.”

I wasn’t actually sure of that but as today had established, I was a horrible liar and a craven.

Jackie stared. “It all comes back to that, doesn’t it?”

“Not entirely,” I said, thinking about what was to come. “Mercury and I are going on a very dangerous journey. One that is probably going to get us killed. We have a chance of doing something great, though, and maybe saving a lot of lives.”

“You’ve said any person who tries to be a hero in this hellhole of a world is a damned fool.”

“You pay way too much attention,” I said.

“Dog ears,” Jackie said, giving her right one a tug.

I snorted. “Either way, I want you to be safe while we’re gone and there to be someone who takes care of you if we’re not there.”

“What about Jessica?”

“She’s going too.”

Jackie seemed to accept that. “All right, I understand.”

“Thank you.”

“You should still forgive Jessica, though.”

I didn’t answer as we walked back to prepare for our trip.

We had a lot of miles to cover and precious little time to tread them**.**

Chapter Eleven

It did not take long to get everything loaded up and to depart in two composite “Hummer-class” vehicles. The interior of the Hummer I drove was old and patchwork, but such was the case with most vehicles still operational in the Wasteland. We were passing up through the Sea of Ash, an immense black rock-covered desert that often rained down soot from three low-simmering volcanoes off the coast.

In the distance, I could see several of the lava-river-filled mountains streaming down red fluid as black hydra-mollusk creatures played and danced around them. The hundred-foot-long Tunnelers were one of the many races unveiled by the Rising, but a species I’d had little contact with. I intended to keep it that way. Still, I couldn’t put into words the scratching in the back of my mind. Professor Armitage and the Great One were hiding things from me, that much was sure, but there was a great deal more going on here than their stated agendas. I just wished I had an idea of what.

“A penny for your thoughts, Booth?” Mercury asked, distracting me.

She was sitting beside me in the front of the vehicle I was driving. Like me, she had changed to a set of thick white clothes designed for desert travel with goggles and a mask hanging from her neck. My arm was once more covered in an illusion, but I’d had it bandaged and double-wrapped again, just to be on the safe side.

“I was just contemplating our quest,” I said, looking in the rearview mirror to see Bobbie Merriweather catching a nap in the back. Bobbie had fully recovered and was wearing a pair of denim pants with a long button-down blue shirt.

Having nothing else to do for several hours more, I continued speaking. “This is not an adventure story. Every surviving being, human or otherwise, should be involved in such a quest. Who sends six or seven people out to save the world?”

“I don’t care much for the responsibility of saving everything either,” Mercury said, reaching over to the glove box and pulling out

one of the nutrient bars the University had supplied for us. I despised their taste, but they were surprisingly invigorating. “However, we’re getting paid. That’s enough to justify taking the risk.”

“Tell that to Mathew,” Mercury muttered.

“You’re not helping,” I replied.

“You should take comfort in religion. I believe the Elder Gods are behind our journey and will support us in our hunt for this Whateley creature,” Bobbie said, looking up from where she’d been sleeping. Assuming she’d ever been doing so at all versus spying on us when we were freer in our speech.

“Are you trying to convert us?” Mercury asked.

“I believe so,” I said amused. “Which is a shame because you’re an atheist and I’m quite comfortable with polytheism.”

“Any god explainable by science is insufficiently advanced for worship—and everything can be explained by science,” Mercury said, smirking.

“Says the sorceress.” I chuckled.

“Details, details.” Mercury laughed.

“Read the *Re’Kithnid*,” Bobbie said, shrugging. She looked out the window to the volcanoes dotting the landscape. “It’ll open your eyes to the truth of the universe. From the story about how Re’Kithnid was born from dreams of a counterpart to Dread Cthulhu to when he built a glorious elysium on another world to when he taught the Crow King how to battle the Old Ones with his coffin-shaped chariot.”

I *had* read the *Re’Kithnid*. It was a book written in the Thirteenth century by the Heretic Nun Brianna Lethder. Brianna had spoken of Elder Gods opposing the Great Old Ones, an apocalyptic battle between Good and Evil, plus a beatific opposite to Cthulhu called Kithnid. It spoke of how humans, Deep Ones, and ghouls would eventually all become one race with humanity embracing free love with the monsters. It was an honestly rather pornographic work which had only been preserved by perverted old priests long after they had sentenced Brianna and her lovers to death by torture.

“It’s a nice story,” I said, deciding to be honest rather than fake interest in her religion. “But it’s not what I believe.”

“I’m sorry you have no hope then.” Bobbie turned away.

“I give myself my own hope,” I said. “It frees my gods from any responsibility to care for my well-being.”

Bobbie smiled. “I used to believe like that. It was simpler then.”

“How does a Deep One hybrid become a believer in the Elder Gods, anyway?” I asked, feeling a strange desire to continue this conversation.

Bobbie shook her head. “To ask that question is to ask my life story.”

“We’re still a long way from Insmaw,” I responded.

“Regale us, oh bounty hunter, with your tale,” Mercury said, agreeing.

“All right,” Bobbie said, stretching her neck. “A long time ago I was a Deep One princess.”

“Pardon?” I asked, surprised by her statement.

“I didn’t know the Deep Ones had princesses,” Mercury said, blinking. “You also don’t look like a fish-woman. You’d think that would be a requirement to be fish-person royalty.”

“Smooth, Mercury.” I rolled my eyes.

“You’d think, but no,” Bobbie said, ignoring the implicit insult. “I wasn’t strictly a princess, though. It’s just the closest title I can think of for describing my position. My mother was Mother Hydra herself, first of the Deep Ones and mother as well as consort to Dagon the Second. They were the weakest of the Great Old Ones spoken of in the *Necronomicon* but still members of that body. Obviously, my name wasn’t Bobbie then, but I cast aside my old identity when I abandoned the gods of my people.”

I whistled, impressed by her pedigree. Not everyone could lay claim to being half-Great Old One.

Mercury just listened, attentive.

Bobbie continued, uninterested in our response. “My father was one of the many humans sacrificed by Obed Marsh during the early days of Innsmouth’s accursed pact with my people. My mother raped him with her powers, then devoured his bones, birthing me a year later. I was but a school of such spawn and we battled it out nightly until only I remained. The Hydra only wanted the strongest of her

brood to live as a lesson for what was expected of me as her priestess."

"Charming," I said.

Mercury just grimaced.

"The Deep Ones are not an innately evil species, but time has bent them to perversities you would not believe." Bobbie sighed, this clearly a subject of deep importance to her. "I was raised to believe that the Deep Ones were the true humanity, that other races deserved to be destroyed, and that Great Cthulhu's rise would trigger the destruction of the unbeliever across the globe." Bobbie smiled, but it was a bitter one. "I'm afraid it came as a great *shock* to the High Priests of my race when Cthulhu didn't deign to notice us when he rose. My people had worshiped him for over a million years, and yet his awakening destroyed as much of our civilization as yours."

"That must have caused a crisis of faith," I said.

"Is that when you converted to worshiping the Elder Gods?" Mercury asked.

"No, not then." Bobbie made a little Elder Sign symbol with her finger across her chest. I was surprised it didn't cause her to flinch. Such magic was poison to the Deep Ones and other creatures of Cthulhu. "The High Priests of Dagon blamed the intermixing of the Deep One race with 'lesser species' like humans, Serpent Men, and ghouls. Already devastated by the Rising, they organized a genocide of all those of mixed blood who did not flee to the surface. Millions of our kind perished in the resulting purge."

"What did Mother Hydra have to say about all this?" Mercury asked.

"Nothing," Bobbie snorted. "She joined with Cthulhu on R'lyeh, taking all of her high priestesses with her—but me. I had been unable to hear the call because I was too busy mourning all of my dead lovers and offspring. I had dozens by that time."

My biggest surprise from her story wasn't the alien behavior of the Deep Ones, but the opposite. Similar stories had played out across the surface world as people found excuses for their gods in old

prejudices or abandoned the world for the worship of terrible things beyond. In that, they were no different than humanity.

“So you fled to the surface?” I asked, intrigued by her story.

“Not at first.” Bobbie shook her head. “Rules do not apply to those who make them. This is a truism for both our societies. As a High Priestess, I was given a special dispensation. But it may surprise you to find out that even a Deep One princess can feel horror at the massacre of the innocent. My faith was broken, and while I might have excused Cthulhu’s or Hydra’s actions as a priestess, I could not claim what the High Priests of Dagon were doing was just.”

It made me ashamed to hate my inhumanity as much as I did. “One’s humanity is found in the oddest places.”

“I find that remark insulting,” Bobbie said, before giving a half-hearted smile. “I used magic to give myself a human appearance and led as many refugees as I could to the surface. Since then, I have fought against my people’s enemies as best I can. Humans, monsters, Deep Ones, or otherwise. The hybrids of the surface are a part of this world now, and both of its parent species must accept that.”

“How’s that worked out for you?” I asked.

Bobbie’s smile fled her face. “I’ve buried two husbands and three wives. The first of my husbands tried to burn me alive along with our children when he found out my true nature. The others died of disease, violence, and old age.”

“If you say so,” I said, wondering if any of us had that kind of time. “You still haven’t explained how you came to worship the Elder Gods.”

“I figured if I was going to be damned by my gods, their enemies would be a better choice,” Bobbie said. “I learned the secrets of the faith from a man named Carter. Now my people worship the Elder Gods, primarily out of trust for me. Even if they have never answered a prayer and only respond to my spells, it feels like I have reclaimed myself from my mother. I worship what I believe in, not what those who betrayed the hybrids among us tell me to.”

“That, I understand.” I prayed nightly to Yahweh, Jesus, the Buddha, and other deities of the Pre-Rising Earth. Beings I’d never

seen a miracle or wonder to prove the existence of as I had with Nyarlathotep and the Great Old Ones. Even so, I clung to those feelings, as they felt like a ward against the darkness. In my mind, even if I could not say whether or not they existed outside of the Dreamlands. “I take it the Insmaw folk are known to you?”

“Yes, I’ve dealt with them before,” Bobbie said. “They’re good people, uninterested in the affairs of the outside world. They just wish to live and breed in peace.”

“Some would say that was a threat by itself,” Mercury said, staring forward into the desert before.

“Some would be assholes,” Bobbie replied.

Mercury laughed. “Some would like to apologize.”

“I’ll accept that,” Bobbie replied, shrugging. “What is your view of being a human hybrid?”

“That you shouldn’t ask,” I said.

“I see,” Bobbie said.

We rode in silence after that point. Eventually, we came across a sight that caused me to forget about our conversation. Hundreds of spikes, each standing hundreds of feet tall, dotted the landscape. They were made of some sort of eerie black metal, existing both in this dimension and several adjoining ones, causing the mere sight of them to overwhelm human vision. Shooting between them were streams of electricity in colors and arcs I’d never seen the like of. These strange pylons altered the air around us and as we drew closer, I could feel an ionization of particles in the oxygen around me.

Storm clouds swirled around this strange forest and electricity flew from the sky down to the pylons before different-colored bolts shot back up into the sky. The world around became hazy, and I felt the same sort of “otherness” about this area that I’d felt in the Hinton Library. This was not a place of this world, this strange power station, and it was transforming our space into something other-natural.

“A Faceless One refinery,” Bobbie said, staring. “Shit.”

“You know what that is?” Mercury said, clutching the side of her seat and burying her nails into it as if on a festival coaster.

“Is this new?” I asked, unable to believe such a massive structure had been constructed recently.

“I’m afraid so,” Bobbie said. “The way was clear last time I went this way.”

“How long ago was that?” I asked.

“Two weeks.”

I took a deep breath. “Who are these Faceless Ones? Are they friendly?”

“Does the name ‘Faceless One’ scream friendly?” Mercury asked.

“No, it implies they don’t have mouths,” I said.

Mercury snorted despite herself.

Bobbie’s expression was grave. “The Faceless Ones are a new race, or to be precise, a very old race that has been in hiding for a long time.” Bobbie looked uncomfortable even talking about them. “They have begun building their strange machines and terrible devices across the world. No one knows to which gods, if any, they pray, but they wield knowledge as to make the University look like a tribe of cavemen.”

“Great,” Mercury grunted. “Because we didn’t have enough crazy-ass shit on this trip.”

I didn’t bother mentioning this wasn’t even in the top ten strangest things we’d seen in the Wasteland. Picking up my radio, I contacted the other Hummer. “We need to get out of here now. We can’t risk any conflicts we don’t know how to deal with.”

“Where? Toward the volcanoes and the giant hydra monsters or to the left and the place where they impale people?” Thom asked.

“Where they impale people,” I said, without hesitating. I didn’t know to what he was referring, but I’d take it over Tunnelers and volcanoes. I’d never been this far north. “We’ll take the long way around.”

“OK, you’re the leader,” Thom said in the most sarcastic manner possible.

Thom’s vehicle turned left, as did mine, only for the sky to start raining down bolts of alien energy upon our heads.

Chapter Twelve

Bolts rained down from the sky, less lightning than terrifying bolts of supernatural energy. They were akin to those that had eradicated the caravan Mercury and I'd been traveling with, only much, much bigger. The rocky earth around us exploded where they struck, sending up showers of dirt burned into glass and pebbles.

"Fuck!" I shouted, doing my best to estimate where the glowing bolts of energy would strike next so I could avoid them. It was like driving through a hail of shells. There was a randomness to the pattern that made it unclear if whoever was behind the bolts was even aiming at us.

Looking in the rear-view mirror, I saw the storm of lightning had spread for miles behind us and there was nowhere to flee from its relentless assault. Left with a choice of evils, I slammed my foot on the gas and drove forward.

"Do you know anything about evasive driving?" Bobbie said, bouncing around in the back before she managed to put on her seatbelt.

"No," I said, looking back at her in the mirror. "How about you?"

Bobbie grimaced.

Much to my surprise, I managed to avoid six or seven bolts with relative ease. The electricity from the sky was not predictable, but it was not moving at the speed of light either. Instead, the bolts were slow enough that death was not guaranteed. Surviving this conflict was a matter of skill rather than the favor of Lady Luck. Turning my head, I saw Thom's vehicle was still moving forward beside me.

"We might just make our way out of this intact," I muttered, avoiding yet another bolt.

Then I saw the bolts start to descend from the sky twice as fast.

"Crap," Mercury muttered, holding firmly onto the sides of the car.

"You said it," I said, watching the windshield crack as an explosion of dirt and rock struck too close to our vehicle. I turned on the barely-functioning windshield wipers, but visibility remained almost nonexistent.

A part of me was tempted to stop the Hummer dead in its tracks, relying on the old adage “Lightning never strikes the same place twice,” but watching the immense storm of light outside through the windshield’s dirt-smeared glass, I knew that was wishful thinking.

“You’ve survived these before?” I asked Bobbie, hoping for some sort of insight.

“I’ve *seen* these before,” Bobbie answered. “The Faceless Ones have other factories across the Wasteland.”

“How long do they last?” I asked, praying for a miracle.

“The storm of fire I survived went on for seventeen hours,” Bobbie responded.

It seemed the gods were not with me today. Or they were with Marcus Whateley.

The Hummer’s radio crackled to life, and I heard Thom’s voice through an immense amount of static. “There’s some sort of cave near my position. I’m going inside!”

Staring out the side window, I saw Thom’s vehicle drive to an outcropping of rocks before disappearing. Seeing the storm’s bolts falling even faster, I did a hard right and felt the wheel jerk and twist.

It was a long shot, one depending on the cave being large enough for both our vehicles and providing any sort of protection from the Faceless Ones’ dread machinery’s by-product. A small hope was better than none, though, and passing through two more explosions of dirt and rock, I pulled the Hummer into the cavern entrance and crashed into the far wall.

“Oomph!” Mercury exclaimed, her seatbelt keeping her from slamming her head against the dashboard. “Nice job, Booth.”

“No need to be sarcastic,” I muttered, putting the car into Park and shutting it off. Looking out the back window, I saw we were a few dozen feet into the cavern’s entrance and outside a rainstorm of light was still visible. Hundreds of thousands of bolts struck the ground, burning and destroying everything in their wake.

Above our heads, I heard the blasts slamming into the cavern’s roof. I did not know if it would hold or collapse against the alien energy striking it. I did, however, know there was nothing we could

do to guard ourselves against it. We had to wait this storm out, the urgency of our quest be damned.

“I wasn’t being sarcastic,” Mercury said, unbuckling her seatbelt. “Any crash you can walk away from is one you should be happy about.”

“Unless it puts you in an unstable unexplored cavern near Tunneler territory,” Bobbie said, looking out her window.

“You’re just a bundle of optimism, aren’t you?” Mercury said, opening the door and sliding out.

“Optimism is one of the few forms of insanity the Deep Ones do not revere,” Bobbie said, also exiting.

My door was jammed against the rock and I had to exit out Mercury’s door before falling into the cavern beyond. A quick look around told me we weren’t so much in a cave as a gigantic wormhole. I wasn’t speaking figuratively, as the entire place was a smooth tunnel pressing down into the earth. This tunnel wasn’t a product of erosion or other natural processes. A Tunneler had created it, and there was no telling how far it went down. There were some rumors that the strange race was capable of journeying through the Earth’s molten core.

This cavern was at a very slight incline, so it seemed to go on for miles and miles without us falling. Looking down into the deep abyss, I couldn’t help but wonder what sort of horrors might come up from below. There was also the question of whether the creature that had dug this tunnel might return from whatever errand it had left on. Then we’d not be at the end of its path, but the beginning.

Just down the tunnel, not twenty feet away, was Thom Braddock’s Hummer. He’d already stepped out of the vehicle and was unloading it with Jessica and August. They were setting up a campsite, which seemed to be a premature decision even if we were caught between a rock and a hard place.

“I didn’t say to set up camp,” I said, looking among them. “We don’t know if this tunnel is safe.”

Thom looked at me as he pitched a tent. “I’m sure this tunnel is not safe. However, the entire world is not safe, and it’s less safe out

there. If you have any better ideas, Black Soldier, I'd love to hear them."

"Stop calling me that," I snarled.

"Aren't you consecrated to Nyarlathotep, destined to become an embodiment of some awful thing the Lord of One Thousand Forms thought up?" Thom asked, sounding like he was asking me what color my hair was. "Because if you aren't, I'll stop talking."

I stared at him. "How the hell do you—"

Thom gestured with his head to Jessica. "She told me."

"You bitch," Mercury said, glaring.

"It wasn't like that," Jessica said, frowning. "You had no right to share that, Thom."

"Then you shouldn't have told me," Thom said, shrugging. "Anyway, we all knew you were a mutant freak anyway, Captain. It's just now we know what kind you are."

"I find it fascinating," August said, smiling. "If you want I could examine you and see what I could do to arrest the process—or speed it along."

"I already have an agreement with the Yithians to provide a cure," I said, looking at August. "I'm also quite sure I couldn't trust you not to put a spell of binding in whatever cure you offered. There's rumors you once raised someone from the dead by summoning a demon to inhabit his corpse and imitate him."

"That's ridiculous," August said. "It was a Gug's consciousness from the Dreamlands. Demons don't exist."

"Don't Gugs eat people?" Mercury blinked.

"Eh." August shrugged. "My client was more than happy to feed her re-animated husband any number of unwanted individuals. Pleasing your customers is really what it's all about."

Thom said, "So, August, you're getting your magic wand back. John is getting cured. Mercury's little half-human abomination is getting an education—"

"Screw you," Mercury growled.

"Maybe after a few shots, but only if you're buying." Thom pointed to himself. "As for me, my brother Snell is coming back if I help this

circus reach its goal. Old Matt's dead, so his wish doesn't matter. What do you two ladies want?" He pointed at Bobbie, then Jessica.

"That's none of your business," Jessica snapped. "And see if I tell you anything again. Friend or not."

"I want the Yithians to find my people a place on this Earth or some other world where we'll be safe from the rest of our kind," Bobbie replied, not hesitating to answer. "This planet is a hellhole and they deserve better."

"*Everyone* deserves better," Thom said, shrugging. "That doesn't mean we're going to get it."

"Do you practice at being an asshole or does it come naturally?" I asked Thom.

"I think it's a little of both. I have a natural talent for offending people, but it's taken years of dedication to my craft to master it." Thom placed his hand over his heart. "So are we pitching camp now or not?"

I looked out to the cavern entrance, which was still being illuminated by regular bolts of energy crashing outside. "It seems so. I didn't get much sleep last night, so it'll be in my best interests to get some now. I suspect everyone else was recruited under similar circumstances."

"You're right," Thom said, "However, before we hit the sack I'd like to settle something up between us."

I hoped it involved me shooting him. "And what's that?"

"Gimme a minute to set up the range and we'll be able to talk about it," Thom said, pulling out a box of empty glass bottles from the back of the Hummer. They caused me to blink, as I wouldn't have thought he'd waste space on them. "In the meantime, I suggest we have dinner before we all head on to the Dreamlands. You ladies know anything about cooking?"

Mercury said, "You know I can send you to hell with a thought, right?"

Thom smirked. "Good thing I'm an atheist."

I literally wasn't sure how that was possible. "I'll cook."

"I don't want monster chow," Thom said, risking getting shot by me then and there.

August sighed and started setting up a fire pit. "*I* will prepare our group's meals. I would not trust any of you to make proper use of the rather significant amount of fresh produce and meats the University has provided us. A good meal is to be cherished, and it requires, if you'll forgive the expression, a magician to prepare."

"Yeah, you do that," Thom said, giving a mock salute and going back to setting up his targeting range.

"I'm going to kill that guy before this mission is through," Mercury muttered.

"He's testing you," Bobbie said, placing a reassuring hand on Mercury's shoulder. "Don't let him throw him off your game. I've seen him shoot and he does so without emotion. This is all a method of putting others off balance."

"Or he's just an asshole," Mercury said, crossing her arms.

"That too," Bobbie said. "Nevertheless, I would not challenge him lightly. I've seen him gun down men and monsters with those enchanted pistols of his."

"You've worked with him before?" I asked.

"We have an intimate association," Bobbie said, smiling.

"No accounting for taste then," Mercury said.

"I did not sleep with him for his mind or personality," Bobbie said. "Simply his body."

I shook my head and went to work. About half an hour later, the camp was set up with the vehicles prepped at the tunnel's entrance and wires attached to an air horn some distance from the camp, so we'd have a warning if we fell under attack. While there'd be no chance we could outrun a Tunneler if it came upon us, any other enemy would find us ready for fight or flight. I just hoped the shower of fire outside was over if flight was a necessity.

Thom had set up a mid-sized shooting gallery, making use of all the empty bottles he'd brought as well as several other rock-based targets. It was also set up far enough away from the camp to not be within listening distance. Approaching the man after he finished, I wondered what he wanted. Did he just want to have a shooting contest? Now?

“You wanted to talk?” I asked, staring at him. I had my pistol at my side, just in case.

“Yes,” Thom said, lifting his revolver. “I wanted to avail myself of your oh-so-inhuman wisdom.”

“I’m as human as the next man,” I said, staring at him.

Thom didn’t take the bait. “Probably. Our father, that is Snell and me, worshiped the Old Ones. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had something unpleasant in his family tree.”

“That’s a dangerous admission in the Wasteland.”

“Which is why I’m saying it here where everyone and their brother is part-monster.” Thom shrugged, firing underneath his shoulder. It hit a bottle anyway. “I just figured I needed an outside pair of eyes and you’re the closest thing to a rational actor here other than Jessica.”

He seemed to know her, which bothered me. “Trick shots don’t impress me, Thom.”

“I’m much better when there’s actual stakes,” Thom said, twirling his gun before holstering it. “Are you willing to help or not?”

I shrugged. “Talk is cheap. First tell me your story.”

“Why?” Thom asked.

“I like to know who is working with me.”

“Suit yourself,” Thom said, shrugging. “I grew up in a compound, a cult really, with my brother Snell and sister Marie. Bandits who worshiped Nyarlathotep as Saint Death. My father was the leader and claimed he had received all manner of great insights from a black magic artifact of some kind. I only saw it once and the damned thing looked like an ordinary trapezoid but they offered it human sacrifices on a regular basis.”

“Sounds like a lovely bunch of people.”

Thom got a sour expression on his face as he looked down at his pistols. “Fun thing was that it worked. Dad gained real magic and it gave him a god complex. Then he ended up dying on a chicken bone of all things. His replacement wanted me and Snell cast out into the Wasteland and Marie brought to him along with the other girls of the compound.”

“What happened?”

Thom lowered his voice. “We were just teenagers back then and I didn’t make it back until years later. When I did, I found out he’d killed Marie and their child during one of his tantrums. I was a man then and so was my brother. Murdered him and all of his followers before burning the cult to the ground.”

I could practically picture it. “I guess their magic didn’t serve them that day.”

Thom paused. “No, it ended serving me. All those murders seemed to make me strong and I woke up with these guns. I could have founded my own cult but I wanted to be free instead. Still, I had nightmares for a few decades thereafter.”

“A few decades?” I asked, surprised. Thom didn’t look to be over thirty-five.

“I’m older than I look,” Thom said, frowning. “I didn’t exactly set out to reach the East Coast, it just sort of happened. I walked from town to town, oasis to oasis, eventually ending up here.”

“What’s the rest of the United States look like?” I asked, genuinely interested.

Thom frowned. “Mostly like this. There’s whole parts of it that are depopulated of anything human now and it was getting worse last time I did a long walk. I considered having a family once or twice, but in the end, I was never really the marrying kind. I was born to kill or, at least, made to and there’s never been a shortage of locations which need a man who can slay monsters or men.”

“I see.” That answered my questions about him, at least. “Go ahead and ask your questions.”

Thom stared down at the ground. “Can the Yithians be trusted to live up their end of the bargain? I don’t care if this Whateley character is going to destroy the world or not. I want to know if they’re going to pay up or cheat us.”

I raised an eyebrow, opened my mouth, then closed it. “I don’t know. I’m sure they’d tell us anything to get us to cooperate. My guess is they’re going to try to screw us. After all, if we accomplish what they want, then they don’t have any incentive to pay. That’s assuming we all aren’t killed on this insane mission of theirs.”

“Yeah, that’s what my gut was telling me. Goddammit.” Thom proceeded to shoot three bottles in a row.

“How long has your brother been dead?” I asked. “I don’t recall meeting him when we had our last … altercation.”

“A while,” Thom said, looking back up. “Do you have any siblings?”

“No.”

“You missed out. Do you think the cultist in our group might be able to bring him back?” Thom asked.

I wasn’t sure how to react to the fact we were having a discussion about resurrecting the dead. “I don’t know. Maybe if you’re willing to pay the price.”

Thom looked down. “I don’t care. I’ll do anything to get those I loved back.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Then I wish you luck. I’ve heard of resurrection spells and techniques, but everything I’ve seen always brings them back changed.”

“We all change,” Thom said, patting me on the shoulder. “You know, you’re all right for an abomination.”

Shaking my head, I took out my pistol and took aim at the bottles. My shooting had suffered since my transformation began and I needed all the practice I could get. I lifted my gun out to shoot when I noticed Jessica walking over.

It was time to settle this between us.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Thom said, looking between us before departing.

Chapter Thirteen

I almost turned around and walked away, but chose to stay for reasons I didn't fully understand. Jessica's approach invoked all manner of feelings and I didn't know how to deal with them. I wanted to forgive her but couldn't. Still, I was able to suppress my sense of betrayal as I looked at Jessica, keeping our time at Miskatonic University in mind. She clearly still loved Jackie, despite the fact my daughter was becoming a monster. She'd also fought with me against the Hound of Tindalos, not hesitating for a second to risk her life for me, just as I'd done for her. It had been like old times, and I missed those days.

Other memories invaded as I gazed at her dust-covered, smudged face. The two of us watching *The Seven Samurai* in the dilapidated New Arkham Majestic movie theater. Gamma Squad's nightly poker game when we were lucky enough to have leave back on base. I remembered being named godfather to her children and she'd vowed to protect mine should I fall before her. I also remembered touching her and the attempt on my life. No, it was not going to be easy to cast that aside.

Jessica coughed into her fist. "I thought we could talk."

"You thought wrong," I said through clenched teeth. I temporarily forgot Jackie asking me to forgive her.

"Why not?" Jessica said, crossing her arms.

"Why do you *think*?" I snapped.

"Yeah, I did," Jessica stopped in front of me, reading my thoughts. "Because you wanted to die."

I opened my mouth to respond before closing it, her words sinking in. That was the matter's heart, wasn't it? I had spent the past year growing more intense in my self-loathing. I'd made it clear I wanted to die before becoming a monster but had those words been hollow? Had they just been a defense against the darkness inside me? A lie to make myself believe I was stronger than I was? Probably. It wouldn't be the first self-deception I'd engaged in to survive this world I'd been born into.

“John?”

“Give me a moment,” I said, forcing myself to remember what Jackie had said. I needed to be stronger than my rage and be the bigger man. I needed to recognize the real source of why I hated her so much. That I had believed, for a second, she hadn’t cared about what I was becoming.

It quieted some of the storm inside me and allowed me to speak truth I hadn’t even been able to admit to myself. “I don’t want to die, not really. I’m sorry if I gave you that impression. I want to live. I just don’t want to become a monster. There’s a difference.”

“Would it help if I apologized?” Jessica surprised me by asking.

I blinked. “What?”

“Cause I do.” Jessica said. “I’m sorry.”

I stared at her as she broke away, aimed her gun at the bottles and shot five in a row. She was a better shot than me. I had to admit a bit of jealousy and wondered how she’d managed to move so far ahead of me.

In the end, I decided I needed allies more than I needed enemies. “Apology accepted.”

Jessica gave me a sideways glance. “Really? That’s all it took?”

“No,” I said, honestly. “But I’m at a point where I need to stop lashing out at everyone who cares about me.”

“I see,” Jessica said. “How long do you have left?”

“It depends on whether the Yithians cheat us or not,” I said, simply. “But if they do? Not long.”

Jessica was silent. “Have you considered that you may actually remain…you?”

I paused. “No.”

“I sought out people who might be able to—” Jessica started to say.

“Don’t,” I said, simply. “What will be, will be. It’s funny. I could have been killed any number of times in the Wasteland over the years, but it’s the slow transformation within that was driving me insane. I just want to put it out of my mind now until my crucible is complete.”

“I understand,” Jessica said, taking a deep breath. “I’d like to be there for you.”

“To look over me in my dying day?” I asked, shooting a bottle despite my hand shaking. “Or to kill me after I transform?”

“Whichever you want.”

“I’d like you to be there with us.” It wasn’t entirely true, but if I was going to lie to myself then I was going to lie to myself until I believed it.

Jessica smiled and it was beatific. “Good, because I was about to offer to fuck you and Mercury both to get you to forgive me.”

“Is that still on the table?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. I was joking, mostly. I’d gotten used to regular sex before Mercury had withdrawn and was starting to eye Bobbie. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d been with a hybrid woman.

Jessica snorted. “No, John.”

“Fair enough.” I paused, frowning.

“Are you and Mercury… alright?” Jessica asked. “I know she loves you but how are things in the—”

“Not since my arm became a giant alien spider’s. It’s been rather hard on the love life.”

Jessica blinked. “So, you haven’t since—”

“Not since she chose to not have our child.” I corrected her before switching the subject. “I’ve heard some disturbing things about what you’ve been up to.”

“You mean the fact that I kill people and steal their stuff?” Jessica took aim again. Her next shot, like the others, was perfect. “That I turned bandit after years of protecting people from them?”

We’d killed hundreds of bandits over the years as part of the Rangers. As reduced as humanity’s population was, it was always slightly more than the amount of food and goods which could be produced. That left hungry and desperate people willing to take whatever they needed from others. There were also less sympathetic individuals who just preferred a life of murder to picking at the dirt. To know Jessica had become one of them was almost as much of a shock as the fact she’d tried to kill me.

“Among other things.” I took a deep breath. “You were always the best of us. I thought, when you came out of your coma, we would have had a life together. You, me, Jackie, Mercury, and the others we cared about.”

“I did, too,” Jessica said, shrugging. “But it didn’t work out that way, did it?”

That was putting it mildly. “Maybe I owe you an apology too.”

“Don’t,” Jessica said, placing her hand on my shoulder. “I made my choice and live with it every day. I thought it would be harder to become a bandit, but it was easy. Once I found people I cared about in the Boston Ruins, it became a simple matter of arithmetic. I’d do whatever I could to protect them. Sometimes that means shooting people and taking their stuff.”

I’d have condemned her, but murder was a daily part of life in the Wasteland. People did what they had to and lived with the consequences. “What about the killing of people with nonhuman blood?”

“Ironic,” Jessica said, pausing in her shot and lowering her gun. “We used to do that as a matter of course when were R&E Rangers. The only person we ever spared was Richard, and that was because he was an asset. If we’d found girls like Jackie before Doctor Ward, we would have killed her too.”

“There’s an awful lot of blood on our hands,” I said, staring at my gun. I aimed, fired, and missed again. This was getting embarrassing. My aim was all off. I could see far more space and distance between the atoms in the air than a human could, but my revulsion to my powers rendered any advantage useless.

“You heard wrong about that part, though, John,” Jessica answered. “I’ve not been killing all the hybrids, inhumans, and so on. Hell, I have a deal going with the city of Tarr’ghar’rrah.”

“Gesundheit,” I joked, imagining the space between my gun shots to be far shorter. That was when I shot five bottles in a row. Yet another sign I just had to embrace my inhuman heritage to achieve my goals. I could almost hear Nyarlathotep chuckling at the fact that I was willing to give into my dark side just to make sure I shot accurately.

Damn him.

There is no damnation, *John*, Nyarlathotep whispered. *Just different kinds of heaven for different kinds of beings.*

I ignored him as I swiftly caught up with Jessica and Thom's score.

"Nice shooting," Jessica said, nodding. "And I didn't name the city."

"Is that where the Elder Thing called the Keeper is?" I asked, remembering the last Elder Things I'd encountered had tried to enslave me after killing Richard.

It was strange, but of all the supernatural and otherworldly creatures out in the Wasteland, I hated the Elder Things the most. This, despite the fact they were widely considered to be one of the closest to human of the alien races we'd dealt with. Much like the Yith or Mi-Go, it was possible to communicate with them and they had understandable goals like survival or the propagation of their race.

Yet, it was that similarity to humanity which made me loathe them as they were a race of slavers as well as arrogant bastards who considered anything different than themselves beneath them. I wasn't looking forward to dealing with them again. It was why I disliked the Yith. They were too much like the Elder Things. Too much like the worst of humanity.

"I know you hate them, John, but they're our best bet," Jessica said. "They might even have a cure."

"We do not have the luxury of hatred." I took a deep breath and shot the last of the bottles, scattering its pieces. "If we can't find Whateley at Insmaw, we'll go to Tarr'ghar'rrah."

"OK. Glad we could get this settled."

Settled. That was a good word for it. I no longer felt quite the same weight hanging over my head. I would deal with my condition by simply living with it and accept whatever hand fate dealt me. It was liberating in some ways but also frustrating because I could have accepted my situation far earlier.

I also was in a situation where Jessica, Mercury, or myself could be killed at any point. If I'd been a smarter man, I would have turned

down the Great One's offer and stayed with those I loved. I was a gambler, though, and chose to risk all of our lives in the hope of getting more time with both. It was a foolish decision and one I wanted to regret.

But couldn't.

I paused. "So, Jessica, how is your life in the Boston Ashlands?"

"Do you mean whether I'm happy as the local bandit queen or whether I've found someone else to share my bedroll?"

"My, what a dirty mind you have." I had been thinking it but that was beside the point.

Jessica paused. "No. I'm never going to love anyone the same way as I loved my husband."

"Ah."

"Not that I don't screw the occasional man's brains out."

I smirked. "Well, if you want to rejoin us, you're welcome."

"Maybe you should join us instead," Jessica said.

I was tempted, which horrified me. The life of a bandit was something which should have repulsed me but morality seemed less important than being with my friend. "I'll think about it. We still have to save the world, you know."

"Assuming it's actually in danger," Jessica said. "I don't think this rock can look worse."

"You never know. Thank you for this talk."

"You're welcome, John." Jessica gave me a kiss on the cheek before departing. I stood there for some time longer before returning to camp in order to prepare for supper and bed. I was glad to have reconciled with her. Little did I know it would not soothe my dreams. They would prove to be the worst of my all-too-brief existence on this world.

Chapter Fourteen

August had not exaggerated his culinary talents; dinner was much better than it had a right to be Afterward, I settled down in a tent with Mercury. The large, enclosed tepee-like structure was more for privacy than protection, as our cavern sanctuary seemed to be holding up against the firestorm outside.

Neither of us was in a talkative mood and we slid into our shared bedroll without a word. I resolved to talk about the Jessica situation the next morning. Feeling Mercury press against me, I bit my lower lip and forced away other thoughts that might distract me.

Even fully clothed, I felt temptations I'd be ill-advised to indulge in. Soon, I told myself. I'll be normal again soon. Then we can be together again. I was tempted to indulge myself in other ways. I decided to just be grateful for a roof over my head (cloth or not), as it prevented me from seeing the alien stars in the sky or the Faceless One's magical storm. Without either to distract me, I soon fell asleep. That was when the horror of my dream began. It was a dream that would shake the core of my identity and end any pretension of my continuing humanity.

I dreamt I was an alien. This statement does not convey the level of grandiosity of the vision that haunted my slumber, any more than to look upon the Earth from space is to see a mud-covered rock. One second, I was John Henry Booth, and the next I was a being walking across otherworldly plateaus with the entire sum of his knowledge and memories available to me.

I was no longer just John Henry Booth but also R'thugh'cruan, an Eye of Yog-Sothoth. R'thugh'cruan was a hero on his world. In the mountainous, boiling-ocean-filled world of Kastro'vaal'utun, there were many dangers for members of his race, and it was his job to face them as a Protector. Like all sentient species in every galaxy but the youngest, the Kastro'vaal had to contend with the Great Old Ones.

I realized, then, it was a misconception that the Earth was especially cursed with the presence of the Great Old Ones. I knew,

as R’thugh’cruan knew, that the Great Old Ones existed in every corner of the universe. Whenever a species achieved ultimate mastery of technology and biology, a profound metamorphosis occurred. In science, this was a theory known as the Singularity, and it had been predicted as a result of humanity’s research in computers and biology. Obviously, we failed to make the transition.

Ages earlier, though, I was an alien and part of a race which was on the verge of making such an ascension. In my vision, R’thugh’cruan was not focused on such esoteric thoughts and instead on driving a living beam of blackened light into the side of an Elder Thing. The creature split in two and rotted away to nothingness before my eyes. I turned to look upon the battlefield, where a million others of their kind had been slain by my fellow Kastro’vaals.

It was billions of years in the past, and the Elder Things were waging a war against the Kastro’vaals. The war against the Elder Things, or T’yruuk’aal’thul, as they were known to the Kastro’vaals, had been going on for the better part of two million years. It had devastated whole galaxies until saner heads had prevailed and restricted their conflict to personal combat. This fight, despite its size, was little more than a border skirmish.

Stretching forth his arms into the air and raising up on all four of his legs, R’thugh’cruan gave an alien shout of triumph. The battle was over and he’d proven his mettle. “[Thanks be to the Key and the Gate, I am victorious.]”

“[You have triumphed over a few of the Elder Things today,]” R’thugh’cruan’s primary mate T’kool’ha spoke behind him. “[But this is little enough victory in a world threatened by the Great Old Ones. You, alone, have destroyed one in single combat. We should focus on defending ourselves against them.]”

R’thugh’cruan turned around to face his mate, who had teleported in at the end of the battle. T’kool’ha was just one of many mates he’d claimed, just as he was one of a dozen she had, but she was his favorite. T’kool’ha did not resemble R’thugh’cruan’s centaur-monster form that I’d seen the other Kastro’vaal wearing. They were a shape-shifting race, having long since mastered the ability of being whatever they wanted to be, and adapting to whatever environment

they wanted. Instead, she resembled something more like a Venus flytrap crossed with several varieties of insect.

The human part of my mind, remembering this alien flashback, felt revolted, and it became doubly so as I *felt* the lust R'thugh'cruan was experiencing for this form. The Kastro'vaals had spread across the universe, assuming local forms and interbreeding with lesser species. Their offspring would transform into one of their own and feel a kinship for the Kastro'vaal. It wasn't even an uncommon method of assimilation.

Speaking his alien language of telepathy and sub-harmonics invisible to humans, R'thugh'cruan said, "[I did not destroy the Great Color-Which-Has-No-Name myself, T'kool'ha. I won that victory through the aid of the Wise One, K'tul'u. He/she/it gave me insight into its weakness. I do not believe we can wage war against the whole of the Great Old Ones and achieve victory. We must focus on our transformation so we can survive them.]"

"[I do not trust K'tul'u or his/her/its people,]" T'kool'ha said, making strange wiggling gestures whose meaning R'thugh'cruan might understand but were meaningless to me. "[They are far along in the transformation and will soon be Great Old Ones themselves. Then things like empathy, love, and compassion will be things of the past. What is gaining the power of the universe if it costs the Kastro'vaal themselves?]"

R'thugh'cruan thought, but did not say, his answer: Power. Survival. Knowledge. The Great Old Ones were eternal unless they were killed, and even that was questionable. The Great Color-Which-Has-No-Name that had eaten galaxies was dead, but might return someday to hollow out worlds anew. R'thugh'cruan craved that sort of strength.

"[Your silence does you no credit]," T'kool'ha said, her mind-voice chiding. "[Why did I marry a warrior like you?]"

R'thugh'cruan moved to embrace her. "[Because you wanted someone who was as ferocious as you.]"

Lacking taboos against such things, they would have begun mating at once if not for the fact that R'thugh'cruan found himself embracing empty air. His confusion was palpable and he looked to

his fellow warriors only to find that they, too, had vanished. Feeling a creeping sense of dread moving up his several nervous systems, R'thugh'cruan teleported back to the rocky cavern that he shared with the rest of his family unit.

Empty.

He checked his children's place of learning.

Empty.

He checked on the beings that had birthed him.

Empty.

He checked the cities of every part of the Kastro'vaal empire.

All empty.

R'thugh'cruan was alone in the universe. Terrified and needing contact with someone, anyone, of intelligence comparable to his own, he attempted to visit worlds other than those inhabited by his people.

He couldn't. An invisible force wrapped itself around him and bent space so that, whenever he came close to leaving Kastro'vaal territory, he found himself back at its heart. His telepathic skills were not well-developed, but he felt the malevolent mocking glee his captor took in torturing him. Like an ant being burned by a child with a magnifying glass, R'thugh'cruan was the plaything of something cosmic. Even suicide was denied him, for he found himself compelled to live when death became more appealing than life. Still, his captor chose not to appear.

Years, decades, and even centuries passed until R'thugh'cruan went mad from isolation. In time, even that passed. Insanity offered no comfort to the isolated mind, and a terrible hate-filled sanity replaced it. I had cautioned Mercury against going sane, but it was not until I experienced R'thugh'cruan's memories that the full truth of my statement became clear. True sanity was infinitely worse than madness.

It was on the steps of the Grand Temple of Yog-Sothoth, R'thugh'cruan's mind twisted beyond recognition and dulled with homemade poisons, that his captor made himself known. It took several minutes for the piss-drunk Kastro'vaal to realize that what he saw was not a hallucination.

Looking upon the figure, R'thugh'cruan wanted to vomit up the meager meal in his two stomachs. The Kastro'vaal had been a cosmopolitan and lusty race, but the thing before him was ghastly. It stood upon two legs and had two arms, with two circular sensory organs and a pyramid-shaped one between them. Another pair were on the side of its top ball-like appendage. The creature also wore patches of material about its body, covering its nakedness, an act which R'thugh'cruan found perverse.

I was jolted by the figure's appearance into recovery of my memories. Staring at the stranger's form, I couldn't help but burst out laughing. I recognized the being standing before me and what shape he was wearing. Nyarlathotep had chosen my own body, my human one from Earth, to visit R'thugh'cruan. He even was wearing my old Remnant military uniform.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of wealth and taste," Nyarlathotep said, laughing.

"[What?]" R'thugh'cruan asked, having no reason to get the joke that was perhaps directed at me.

"[A message to one who listens through you,]" Nyarlathotep said.

Richard Pickman Junior had played many Pre-Rising songs over the years of our acquaintance, and that sentence reminded me of one. I understood what the Other God was doing, and it terrified me that he was showing me a message through the suffering of an alien being millions of years gone.

"[I have come to speak with you]," Nyarlathotep said, chuckling. "[I hope I didn't keep you waiting long.]"

"[What?]" R'thugh'cruan could only ask again, more confused than I was.

"[I am here to provide you answers]," Nyarlathotep said, looking at his watch. "[Provided I am entertained]."

"[*Is this all a game to you!*]" R'thugh'cruan screamed as loud as he could, ready to strangle the god where he stood.

"[Yes]," Nyarlathotep said, putting his hands behind his back and holding them. "[For what else is life when you are immortal, indestructible, and all-knowing? Amusement is the highest virtue a being like me can aspire to.]"

R’thugh’cruan slumped down onto the blackened jagged stone of his dead city’s streets. “[Why, then? Just, why?]”

“[It was not I who destroyed your people],” Nyarlathotep said, looking down. “[You and your kind have provided me fleeting amusement on no less than three separate occasions. This alone would have guaranteed your survival for epochs to come, and I halted the evolution of no less than fifteen species that would have destroyed you to see how you might flower. Yet I am not alone in such power, and a being called Oroarchan erased your people from history.]”

“[Erased?]” R’thugh’cruan choked out.

“[You are ceasing to amuse me,]” Nyarlathotep said, frowning. “But yes, he consigned your species to oblivion as a stray extension of his mighty mind. Oroarchan, being a living color, feasts upon time, and yours fell victim to its massive hunger. Because of a joke you told me, the one you have experienced these past few million cycles, I created this dream-world for you to inhabit.]”

“[Kill me,]” R’thugh’cruan whispered. “[I beg you.]”

“[I could do that,]” Nyarlathotep said, turning around and giving a devil’s grin. “[Or, perhaps, I could teach you the secret of how to revive your people.]”

“[I’ll do anything!]” R’thugh’cruan shouted.

“[Oh, I do love when finite beings say that. They so rarely mean it.]” Nyarlathotep chortled. “[Your race lies with Yog-Sothoth now. In the Many-Angled Place, they live with the Hounds of Time and all the Never’Were and Might’Have’Beens which have been forced from time. Terrible things, even by my standards. Yet it is possible to return them to existence if one knows the right things.]”

“[Do you want me to kill someone? A million someones? I’ll do it,]” R’thugh’cruan’s voice shook with a desperate, irrational emotion long absent from his body—hope. He loved and loathed the horrific-looking alien thing that was speaking to him, simply because it was the first being he’d spoken to outside of his own thoughts in an age.

“[I suppose you could do that,]” Nyarlathotep said, shrugging. “[There is a dying world in the far future, a speck of dust whirling around a flicker of light spinning around Azathoth’s court. Its sole

claim to fame is it will be where many Great Old Ones you know will lay their head to rest and dream grandiose thoughts for an afternoon. I will reincarnate you, billions of years from now, and give you the means to summon your species to inhabit this world. The only price will be the destruction of an already soon-dead race living upon it.]"

Oh no.

"[Sounds delightful. Let's do this.]" R'thugh'cruan's enthusiasm couldn't be denied. Would I have done anything different in his place? No, of course not, for we were one and the same.

God help me.

"[A bargain is struck then,]" Nyarlathotep clasped his hands together. He then started talking to me, directly. "[You, John Henry Booth, will be the vessel for the Kastro'vaal's return. When your body finishes its transformation into its soul's past form, hastened by the amount of murder you perform, you will know what to do. You are the one who will destroy humanity and bring back an old race every bit as worthy or more of survival.]"

And somehow, I knew I would.

That was when I woke to the sound of gunfire.

Chapter Fifteen

Mercury and I lay in each other's arms when the sounds of gunfire filled the air. They happened before the makeshift alarms we set up were triggered. A couple of explosions followed, the result of grenade traps we'd set.

"Shit!" Mercury said, jolting upwards.

I grabbed my homespun boxer shorts and pants, sliding them both on in one clean motion before taking up my rifle. Heading out the tent flap, I saw the rest of our group had taken position behind supply boxes and was firing endless numbers of rounds into an oncoming horde of the living dead.

Reanimated, known as "West-boys" in Remnant lingo.

The Reanimated moved with an inexorable, cold shuffle of their rotting limbs, but this was a trick. They were unnatural things that did not need to obey the laws of physics. When they got close, they often displayed astounding speed and could perform feats of strength impossible for a living man or woman.

No one knew why the Reanimated existed. A scientist in the early twentieth century named Herbert West had reverse-engineered an alchemical formula in the Black Keys of Solomon to bring them about, but "naturally-occurring" Reanimated were a fact of life in the Wasteland. In the Tainted Zones and places where M-Rads were high, death could not hold the fallen, and they returned with an all-consuming hatred for life.

Reanimated were one of the rare exceptions to the creatures of the Rising having no real interest in humanity save as a bug to be squished or the occasional meal. While some necromancers like Doctor Ward or the Hasturians could control them, most were the relentless enemies of all life.

This particular horde of undead looked fresh. They wore the clothes of scavengers and Wasteland folk with fresh bullet holes and wounds from where someone had cut them down with conventional weapons. Their stink was repulsive, letting me know they'd been dead for weeks, and there was a wind coming from the tunnels

below. It was their numbers that staggered me, though. There were nine or so creatures along the front row and hundreds more behind them. Someone had slaughtered an entire town, something humanity couldn't afford to lose, just to bring the inhabitants back as weapons. The remainder of our group's grenade traps went off and blew two dozen or so of the monsters apart but left barely a dent in their ranks.

We needed to flee.

Turning my head, I saw that the lightning storm was still ongoing. There was no escape the way we came.

"Shit," I cursed aloud. "When it rains it pours."

I would never admit it, but Reanimated terrified me. Every time I saw one of those horrific parodies of life, I couldn't help but flash back to the massacre of Gamma Squad in the Black Cathedral. I had faced infinitely worse creatures both before and after, but they were the ones that made me wish I could flee. Stephen, Jimmy, Parker, and Garcia had all perished because I wasn't strong enough to defend them.

"I hate West-boys!" Thom shouted, firing into the ranks of the undead with two pistols. Every bullet was a headshot and caused the Reanimated they struck to catch fire before falling to the ground, creating an inferno the others had to walk through. I'd have to ask Thom where he got his rounds.

Jessica was sitting behind a crate of boxes, firing an automatic machine gun filled with flamer rounds. The Remnant-designed ammunition was less effective than Thom's shots, but as she released round after round of explosive ammunition into the left side of the horde, she crippled their movement. Jessica noticeably aimed at the Reanimated's legs.

On the right side of the shambling assault, Bobbie had conjured her flaming whip anew but was commanding it with her mind to move like a snake far from her hands. The flaming serpent bisected Reanimated, set them on fire, and decapitated them, but seemed to grow weaker with each one slain.

August, meanwhile, was standing far behind the rest of the group working a powerful enchantment to the Gods of Ulther, moving his

hands in elaborate, complex gestures and invoking the names of ancient Stygian (later Egyptian) gods mixed in with other deities of the Hyborian Age.

Something was happening as a result, but I couldn't tell what. Any man could call on the Great Old Ones or gods of the Dreamlands, but it was a rare being who knew how to make them respond. I knew but a handful of chants compared to him and Mercury.

And yet the Reanimated still came.

The first few broke through the assault of my fellows and rushed forward, passing the others by and heading straight for me and Mercury. My lover was behind me, dressed in a plain shirt over her pants. Lifting my rifle up, I held it steady and blew the head clean off the first of my attackers. The next moved too fast for me to shoot, hissing and spewing blood from its pus-filled mouth.

I slammed that one across the face with the butt of my rifle before using it as a shield against the pouncing attack of a third. Mercury shot both in the side of the head, causing my ears to ring.

"Next time, warn me!" I shouted, dropping the two truly dead corpses to the ground.

"No time!" Mercury said, firing headshot after headshot into the undead crowd. I did the same, knowing this might be the last fight of our lives. Not every one of our bullets hit home, but enough of them did to hold the creatures in place.

No, that was a mistake. They weren't held in place. They were *walking* in place. Men, women, children, and deformed mutant amalgamations were all pressing forward but unable to proceed. It was as if they'd struck an invisible barrier. Narrowing my eyes, I saw the Elder Sign hovering in the air.

A dark force was pounding against it and cracking it, but for the moment, it was holding against the terrible scourge descending upon us. Looking at the piles of corpses on the ground, I saw we'd slain close to fifty of the beasts.

Not even a drop in their ranks.

Jessica, Thom, Mercury, and I kept firing into their ranks for a minute longer but stopped when it was clear they weren't

accomplishing much. August, though, fell on the ground and took a series of deep breaths.

“You’re doing?” I asked, looking over at August.

August nodded. “It’s as powerful a magic as I can work without a sacrifice, human or animal. The University may call magic technology of the mind, but it functions like the appeasement of hungry gods. They drain my life every time I call on them when they don’t receive their offerings. Forgive me, but I don’t love any of you enough to give more than I already have.”

“And if we need more?” Thom asked, his face sweaty from combat.

“Then I suggest you figure out which one of you should die,” August said, shrugging. “I, for one, pick you.”

Thom made an obscene gesture back at him.

“Let’s put a pin in killing each other for the time being,” I said, staring at the horde. “Something is eroding the barrier. I can feel it.”

“Yes,” August said, breathing hard. “There is a more powerful presence behind this than I. Something that wants us dead.”

“Oh, what tipped you off? *The herd of zombies*?” Thom said.

August snorted. “Please, true zombies are completely different.”

I was ready to shoot all of my allies.

“How long do we have?” I asked.

“Five minutes,” August said, shaking his head. “With Mercury’s help, I might be able to strengthen the barrier to twenty.”

“And with the human sacrifice?” Thom asked.

“Bastard,” Bobbie snarled.

“Just asking,” Thom said, shrugging. “We’ve got the entire world at stake and I’m sure one of y’all would love to give your life for it.”

Jessica took a moment to give Thom the finger.

He just smiled back.

“Can Bobbie help strengthen August’s spell?” I asked.

Bobbie shook her head. “No, his sorcery is different from mine.”

Great. “Well, we better think of something since that’s not going to hold much longer.”

“Nice observation, Captain,” Thom grunted. “What other tidbits of wisdom would you like to share?”

Nope. Not all my allies. I was just going to shoot him.

“These creatures knew where we were,” Jessica grumbled. “It makes me think that firestorm outside was no accident.”

“You think they drove us to this cave?” Mercury asked.

“No, I think they were trying to kill us. This is Plan B.” Jessica clenched her teeth. “Anyway, you could, I dunno, wish ’em away, Auggie?”

August shook his head. “No. I can maybe summon something nasty to deal with them, but it’s a bad idea to bring something into reality unless you have complete control. I can’t guarantee such a thing as long as whoever is controlling these things is out there. Breaking a wizard’s control over a demon means said wizard getting eaten and shit out in short order.”

“And what a loss to the world that would be,” Thom said, looking at a naked four-year-old girl with her lower jaw missing. “Fucking West-boys.”

I could hear the gnashing, snarling, and hissing of the monstrous parodies of mankind just outside of the barrier. It was a reminder of just how fragile the difference between humans and monsters truly was. I didn’t know if their souls were trapped in their bodies or if they’d ever had souls to begin with, but the thought of becoming one of those things was a fate worse than becoming an Eye of Yog-Sothoth. I was tempted to give into the horror inside me if it allowed me to tear into those things and save our group.

Do it, Nyarlathotep whispered. *Let out the Beast within*.

No, I hissed. I’d rather die.

Then you will. *Eventually*.

“So, if we kill the wizard, the horde stops?” Mercury asked.

“That’s the size of it, yes,” August said. “I think. Magic is never really tame the same way science is. No matter what the University maintains.”

“Do you have any idea how far away this wizard might be?” I asked, the beginnings of a plan formulating in my head.

“Close,” August said, looking like he’d run for ten miles. “This kind of necromancy isn’t something you can do from a distance. That’s thousands of souls bound to their corpses, begging for the release of

oblivion or to feed the dreams of their gods. If it's anything human, it has to be right behind the horde or damn close to it."

"And if it's not remotely human?" I asked.

"Then we're even more fucked." August shrugged.

At least he was honest. "Good to know."

"John, what are you thinking?" Jessica asked.

"I'm going to do something stupid." I looked back at Mercury. "Try and reinforce the barrier. August, summon your monster. I'll make the distraction for you. Bobbie, Thom, Jessica, keep killing those things."

Mercury said, "What if your plan doesn't work, Booth?"

"Then I suggest you each save one bullet for yourselves. I won't be needing one because I'll be dead," I said, running at the barrier full speed.

"Good luck!" Thom said, surprising me.

My thinking was the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth were the remains of the Kastro'vaal civilization, a species that no longer existed in our universe because they'd *never* existed. They'd been retroactively plucked from Creation by a Great Old One's temporal manipulation. It was like going back in time and killing someone's father before they were conceived. That person ceased to exist in the physical world.

Yog-Sothoth, however, existed at all points in space/time simultaneously. That included times that no longer existed. Therefore, the Kastro'vaal had continued to exist in his dimension and probably made some sort of pact with that eldritch god. That was why they'd been visible from the Hinton Library. With the library to show me how, I had some sort of connection to the same universe. If I took advantage of those same cracks I'd seen in reality, I could do what the University students could. If I couldn't? Well, I was about to die looking like a fool.

Passing through the barrier, I slammed into the chests of a dozen of the Reanimated. The creatures brought their grasping claws and gnashing teeth down onto my body. My rifle fell from my hands. I threw my now-empty hands up in the air to struggle but it was no use and …

I found myself in the middle of a tunnel empty of Reanimated. Up the tunnel, I could hear the gnashing and hissing of the undead horde I'd just escaped. Down the tunnel, I could see a turn in it and the light from a fire where a shadowy humanoid figure knelt in prayer position. I could hear mumbling of some sort of blasphemous prayer. I'd found the wizard who was controlling the Reanimated.

"Huh," I whispered, staring at the shadow. "It worked."

"No, it didn't," I heard a voice say behind me.

Turning around, I saw an indistinct form nine feet tall, with horns upon his head and a bulky figure far more than my own muscular frame. He seemed to be both here and not here, existing in multiple places at once. A concept I was rapidly getting used to. I couldn't concentrate well enough to see the whole of him, though.

"Whateley?" I asked, staring. "You're the one trying to kill us."

"No," the figure said. "Quite the opposite. You're welcome, by the way. I wouldn't suggest trying that again without a few centuries of practice."

The figure faded away.

I shook my head and looked around for my rifle. It hadn't come with me. I was now shirtless, weaponless, and facing a wizard controlling a horde of monsters. If I was King Conan of the Aquilonians or Titus Crow, I might have had a chance, but this was ridiculous. Hearing the sounds of gunfire echo down from the tunnel, I knew the barrier was starting to fail.

I reached down and picked up a large rock. One barely able to fit in my hands. This was a horrible idea for any number of reasons, but if I needed to go caveman in my attempt to save the group, I would do so. My footsteps were silent as I moved, slipping around the corner of the tunnel to see the torch-lit source of the Reanimated assault. The torches rested on black iron stands, like lamps, implying the creature needed light the same as any other human.

But the source of our woes was not human.

Not remotely.

In the center of the tunnel, in a multi-angled star painted on the ground, one drawn in blood that seemed to shift in size and dimension, knelt a figure that would haunt my nightmares if they

already weren't full of even worse creatures. The figure wore robes similar to the University's, only much more ornate—jet black with a beautiful white interior visible under the hood, and long trim covered in symbols that were eerily familiar to me. It was not the figure's attire that was unsettling, though—it was its face.

Or more, precisely, its *lack* of one.

Where there was supposed to be a face was a disgusting lump of burned, tanned flesh. It was like someone had carved away its features only for it to heal over everything that would identify it as a person. What was worse, though, was its hands. The ones extended out into the air. Each one's palm contained a mouth that was speaking, a sickly black tongue moving in and out with each inhuman syllable spoken.

"Arch'tung Ku'Tu'Lu fg'tnah fg'tnah Has'tor nastuul T'ruuuk'rhu zal Rastogan. Gh'targh Gh'targh Oroarchan."

The words, a series of invocations to Great Old Ones both familiar and otherwise, terrified some primordial part of my brain that had evolved in the shadow of the sleeping Dark Lords of the Earth. I felt waves of power radiate from the ever-changing star at the figure's feet, nausea and headache afflicting me from just being in its presence.

The Faceless One—for what else could you call such a creature?—raised its voice, and I realized it knew I was there. The words increased my terror a thousandfold, reducing me to a figure crying and quivering on my knees. I was stripped of all rational thought, left little more than a terrified babe afraid of the dark. Except I had been alone on a dark and empty world for the age of a species, and the terror it sought to inflict upon me just returned me to a familiar place.

Laughing, because there was no point in any other emotion, I hurled my rock against the creature's head. The rock struck it where its nose was supposed to be and sent it spiraling backward, out of the ever-changing star. Once it was gone, the star dimmed and transformed into an ordinary eight-pointed burst symbol made of what appeared to black chalk mixed with bone dust.

The spell was broken.

The Faceless One got up despite the fact that my throw would have killed an ordinary man. Much to my surprise, it lifted its hands and an erudite-sounding voice spoke in English. “That was a very foolish mistake, Captain Booth. One I’m afraid you will have to pay the penalty for.”

That’s when its shadow moved from its body and began to strangle me.

Chapter Sixteen

The shadow was strangling me to death. I should have been used to such sights by now, but my first emotion was not fear, but confusion. The scholar in me wanted to know how the fuck it was possible. A shadow wasn't a physical thing but an absence of light, no more able to come alive to attack you than a hole. Of course, I'd seen that too.

In a way, the Shadow-Thing was almost mundane. It had the rough outline of the Faceless One's body, with just the occasional spike or tentacles hinting at the true nature of the being inhabiting the shadow. Whatever it was, it wasn't very strong (at least in this dimension), and I was able to keep it from breaking my neck outright. The shadow had enough physical substance for us to grapple.

Deciding that the paradoxical thing choking the life out of me was not something I wanted to try to deal with directly, I fell backward and knocked one of the torch stands over. As planned, the stand landed on the side of the Faceless One's ornate robes. The flames seemed almost eager to burn the vestments, consuming them as if they were dried paper.

The alien wizard let out a shout of surprise and the Shadow-Thing released its grip, disappearing back into whatever dimension it had been summoned. Any hope of the Faceless One burning to death vanished as it threw its burning attire to the side. It was wearing a white shirt and faded khaki pants, looking almost comical with its inhuman visage.

"You're starting to irritate me, mutant," the Faceless One said, speaking in a manner more befitting a human than a monster.

"I have that effect on people." I wrinkled my brow, sizing it up. "What are you?"

"One of the last *true* humans," the figure said. I'd heard few more hateful tones, and all of them had been from the most purity- and genetic-deviance-obsessed members of the Remnant. "My kind are the last of the original strain of mankind. Those the Elder Things modified using the shoggoths to be smarter and more graceful than

ape-kind. You and the rest of your misbegotten race of mutants are just the sad droppings of—”

I interrupted it by punching it where its jaw would be. The Faceless One fell backwards, stunned by my abrupt attack. It began speaking a spell, only for me to slam it against a wall, grab a rock off the ground and use it to shatter its right hand. The Faceless One let out a screaming wail from its left hand, right before I brought my rock down upon it as well.

The Faceless One *was* human, at least enough to be vulnerable to the same sort of violence we were. The Faceless One struggled to continue speaking a spell, but its tongues were crushed and the words came out even more of a garbled mess. Grabbing the figure by its shirt, I threw it over my shoulders and sent it bouncing against the ground. I decided the Faceless One was a man and that I would refer to it as “him” from now on. At least, for as long as it remained on this Earth.

Which hopefully wouldn’t be long.

My assumption of victory proved premature. On the end of the tunnel I’d come through, there was now the sound of a thousand moaning horrors. I remembered August’s admonition not to disrupt a summoning spell, as such beings were likely to turn upon the beings who bound them. The Shadow-Thing had proven the exception to the rule, but the Reanimated were coming to destroy their creator. I didn’t think they would be inclined to show anyone around him much mercy either.

“No,” the Faceless One said, spitting up jagged teeth and blood from its hands. “Not like—”

The Faceless One was cut off by the shambling horde of Reanimated coming around the tunnel and stretching out their arms to grab him. The Faceless One was taken by surprise and didn’t have time to react, falling into their grip. He let out a yelp of surprise as I took a step back and watched the creatures tear into his body.

A pair of women with open holes in their stomachs, leaking innards, tore pieces out of the Faceless One’s arms while a pair of cherubic dead-eyed children tore off his legs. The remainder of the Faceless One’s body was fell upon by a half-dozen Reanimated who

each took bites, swallowed, and feasted again. Had I a gun, I would have ended the Faceless One's suffering, but I was not so equipped. I was also in trouble because while a dozen or so of the Reanimated stayed to devour the soon-to-be bare remains, the rest shuffled around them toward me.

Grabbing the closest torch, I held it in front of me as I backed away. The hopelessness of my situation didn't take a genius to figure out. I could flee farther into the tunnels, but with no permanent source of light and no guarantee the caverns ever came up again, it would be trading the speedy death of being devoured for the long one of starvation. If there was such a thing as a tracking spell, Mercury did not know it, and none of my other associates would want to bother looking for me.

Throwing the torch at the nearest Reanimated, I made my decision to fight to the death. I was many things, but a craven had never been one of them. In a way, a hopeless battle against a foe like the Reanimated was a blessing. It saved me from the indignity of suicide as well as gave purpose to my final minutes. Better still, it thwarted Nyarlathotep's prophecy of my destroying humanity to bring back the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth.

Grinning, I grabbed another torch to set more Reanimated on fire. They screeched and let inhuman wails forth, falling back into their fellows, while others moved to tear me limb from limb. I knocked at them with the torch's metal stand, banging them away while the light dimmed on the other end. That was when a miracle occurred.

Of sorts.

Far from my position, the Faceless One's decapitated head was lifted by one of the cherubic children devouring his corpse. Holding it tight, the zombie squeezed it into a pulpy goo. The inhuman strength of the Reanimated was less impressive than the aftermath. Every one of the Reanimated, including the ones on fire, stood still. Their arms fell to their sides and almost all collapsed to the ground like puppets whose strings had been cut.

Nine of ten Reanimated were dead again, the source of their magic destroyed. Magic was a complicated discipline, and I wondered how the brain death of the Faceless One had achieved

this. Surely, if he'd been the source of their unholy resurrection, he would have dismissed them before they started eating him? Or had he been unable to do so because I'd destroyed his hand-mouths?

My curiosity died when I realized that nine out of ten was not the entirety. Of the thousands of undead creatures there were still hundreds remaining, looking confused and angry among the corpses of their fellows. Whatever hellish force had drawn them back from death to unnatural life held them fast and was not going to let them go.

While their faces were dead and decayed, I could see an all-too-human expression of outrage pass across them. Despite their hostility, they were not mindless, and their anger would soon need a focus. I had no intention of offering myself for that honor. Taking a deep breath, I ran forward and knocked down the closest of the Reanimated before running over it and a hundred other corpses in my bare feet. The Reanimated came out of their trance-like state as I passed, spinning around to grab at me or chasing after me. Many of them fell over their fellows or stumbled, which gave me a bit of an edge. Not much of one, though, as a single misstep could mean the creatures descending upon me like crows on a corpse.

I'd seen many horrible things in my life. So many, it was difficult to say if I'd have been considered a sane man in the Pre-Rising world. More likely, they would have consigned me to a lunatic asylum for any number of ailments ranging from lack of empathy to bursts of homicidal rage. Yet, as ruthless and detached as the world had made me, passing over so many corpses made me sick. The sheer waste of life was staggering, especially when I saw how many children lay among the dead.

Looking down at the horrors was a mistake, as one of the Reanimated had been intelligent enough to hide among the corpses and grab my right leg as I passed. Hitting the ground, face-first, I felt an agonizing tearing and saw a putrescent near-skeletal face biting into my calf while sinking its bony fingertips into my now-exposed flesh. Blood leaked from the wound, crippling me.

Unable to move my leg, I looked across the bodies before me and saw a six-shooter in a nearby corpse's holster. Virtually every man

and woman over the age of sixteen learned to carry a weapon in the Wasteland but it hadn't done these folks any good. Reaching over, I grabbed it, even as I felt the undead thing chewing on my leg. I turned, aimed, and fired, catching the creature in the head. It dropped, but the pain in my leg didn't subside. My calf was a bloody mess.

Looking up, I saw a dozen or so of the Reanimated starting to walk at a slow, deliberate pace toward me. Their milky eyes were unfocused and glazed but the expressions on their faces were of pure malicious glee. I had no idea what sort of torments these individuals had undergone or what horrors their living death had inflicted on their minds but I wasn't about to surrender to them. Even if my injury meant fighting on was futile.

"Fuck you," I said, shooting another of the creatures coming down the tunnel in the head. I shot a second, missed my third shot, and killed another. Aiming my gun, I pulled the trigger to find the revolver was now empty. The remaining eight or nine Reanimated were but ten yards away now and growing closer every second. I could hear others coming up behind me as well, descending upon me in all directions.

Tossing the useless revolver aside, I frantically searched for yet another gun in the charnel pit around me. I saw nothing but again grabbed the torch stand I'd dropped. The light had gone out, but the stand was still heavy and made of iron. I lost it when the Reanimated descended upon me, each trying to tear another chunk out of my body.

I lost all sense of myself, smashing heads and knocking away bodies with a manic glee. I stopped swinging with my left arm altogether and used solely my right, decapitating Reanimated one after another before bisecting yet another. Heads continued to moan and wail blasphemies even detached from their bodies, my deranged will crushing them after I lost sight of more mobile targets. A single one, his lower half missing, crawled up toward my groin to bite my femoral artery before I brought down the end of the torch stand on top of its head.

I blinked, seeing almost a dozen more corpses added to the pile. The bloody carnage was impossible, yet there it was. I'd lost myself in such rage only a few times before. The first had been when I'd found myself assaulted by Remnant traitor and quisling Peter Goodhill. No, wait, that wasn't right. No, the first time I'd ever lost myself to the bloodthirsty rage was facing down a shoggoth to protect Jessica. A creature less like a monster and more like a living lake of murderous fury. I'd killed that, too.

Looking around the charnel pit surrounding me, I saw my bloody leg continued to bleed, and I started crawling toward the other end of the tunnel. It was possible, even likely, that my fellows had abandoned me. I shouted at the top of my lungs for them, possibly attracting more of the Reanimated, but I wasn't going to die here. I decided, in that moment, to live. No matter the cost, whether I became a monster or not.

I would live.

As I crawled over body after body, the stench was overpowering. In addition to the smell of the early onset of decay, a few older corpses aside, many of the dead had lost control of their bowels when they'd died the first time. The Faceless Ones hadn't bothered to clean up their creatures before sending them to kill us. There was no way to describe what it was like to have to move over the fallen Reanimated, inch by horrible inch.

I passed over the corpses of little girls, teenagers, a pregnant woman, a boy of four, and old men. It was like a scene from hell, threatening what little remained of my sanity. This was what the Great Old Ones had done to the world. I started laughing after screaming for help for the fifth time, unable to quite wrap my head about what I was going to do if my friends left me. I pondered making deals with the unthinkable.

Looking up, I saw a single Reanimated blocking the tunnel passage that led to my associates. I could see the light of our campsite beyond. This Reanimated was different from the others. First of all, it was headless. Wearing the tattered remnants of a Pre-Rising military uniform that looked like it had been old when the world ended, it held its own mummified head in its hands.

“I am the Major,” the figure said, its voice like a baritone from Azathoth’s eternal symphony. “I speak for the Dead.”

“I am alive,” I said, continuing crawling.

“Yes,” the figure said. “Why, though? Death is the fate of humanity and it is a blessed release from the horrors beyond. The Dark consumes all and provides peace for the mistake of nature we call consciousness. Gh’targh Gh’targh Oroarchan. The Unimaginable Horror shall consume this world and bring peace to the universe.”

“Oroarchan can kiss my ass.” I was surprised the Great Old One who destroyed the Kastro’vaal was the same as the Unimaginable Horror.

The figure let out an amused chuckle. “I see the future for you, John. A dead world, every single being on it destroyed, and you left to inherit the empty graveyard this world will become.”

“That’s my past.”

The Major didn’t answer and faded away, revealing itself to be nothing more than a psychic projection.

Or I was hallucinating. I couldn’t tell which. I was getting a lot of that lately.

I was about ready to pass out when I saw someone most unexpected looking down at me. Thom crouched down and stared at me.

“Yep, he’s still alive.”

“It doesn’t work that way!” Mercury shouted.

“Back the hell off, Thom!” Jessica added.

I laughed, then fell unconscious.

Chapter Seventeen

I woke up again in the back of our Hummer, laid out on a bedspread in the modified vehicle's back. We were moving again, the sky dark and full of stars. Most of the supplies that had been stored where I was resting had been moved into the back seat on the passenger's side.

Bobbie was up front, alone. Beside me were August and Mercury, both of them tending to me with the medical equipment supplied by the Yithians. I felt like shit, half- off my mind on Wasteland meds and still shuddering from the terrible things I'd witnessed fighting the Reanimated.

My leg was treated, but given that the creature had bitten down to the muscle, there was little they could do. Ironically, if I'd lived in the Pre-Rising era, I might have been crippled forever, but there were magics that could be employed now.

Dark ones.

"Where am I?" I asked, moaning.

"On our way to Insmaw," August said, staring at John. "The lightning storm stopped a few hours ago."

"Is everyone alive?" I asked, my voice dry.

Mercury handed me an old plastic bottle filled with filtered water. "Amazingly, yes. I don't know what you did but the zombie horde abandoned attacking us right after the enhanced barrier went down. Then most of them died … again."

"Emphasis on most of them," August repeated my earlier thoughts. "The ones in the back turned around to attack us again. That's why it took us so long to get to you, even though we heard your gunshots and screams."

"We also had to convince Thom to come with us," Mercury said, smirking. "At gunpoint."

"Which wasn't necessary," August said, frowning. "He'll remember that."

"I'm not afraid of Thom Braddock." Mercury snorted.

“You should be,” August said. “His shooting is not natural. I say that in the most literal-and-you-should-take-my-word-for-it-because-I’m-a-wizard way possible. Every bullet was a headshot and some of them curved.”

“Trick shooting is the least impressive thing I’ve seen all day,” Mercury argued. “Besides, it was John who—”

“The Faceless Ones are working for the Unimaginable Horror,” I said, “or Marcus Whateley. I don’t know if you can work for a Great Old One any more than a priest can for God. The Unimaginable Horror, Oroarchan is its name, is linked to the Reanimated somehow. I don’t think it’s imprisoned as much as the Yithians think it is.”

August nodded. “That makes sense. Cthulhu was bound in the sunken city of R’lyeh for millions of years before the city rose, flooding the Old World’s coastal cities. Even before he rose, though, his psychic dreams created millions of cults to him. The Unimaginable Horror, Oroarchan, may be equally influential despite his bound state.”

“He came with the oceans,” I muttered, thinking feverish thoughts. “Humans are sixty-five percent water.”

“I don’t think that’s relevant.” August looked at me like I was babbling, which admittedly I was.

“The Dead rising, all because …” I trailed off, visions of the dead rising by the millions to slaughter humanity and hustle along the awakening of the Great Old Ones.

The psychic disturbances helped to create a suitable environment to awaken them. The Unimaginable Horror had been killing and raising the dead since humanity first evolved, feeding on mankind’s suffering to erode the bonds the Yithians had placed on it. Untold atrocities, wars, and murders had been instigated by its will the way a farmer plants crops.

I just knew it.

Mercury put her hand on my shoulder. “Booth?”

I blinked, coming out of it. “Words cannot express what a shit night I’ve been having.”

“I can tell,” August said, poking my leg and causing me to grimace. “The Faceless Ones have been watching a lot of old

movies because the bite here was poisoned. If you were still human, it would have killed you."

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"I can heal it tomorrow with an animal sacrifice or I can use your life energy to do it now," he said, looking at me. "There will be consequences, though."

"How much?"

"Five years off your life," August said, his voice plain and direct.

"Do it," I said.

"John!" Mercury said, appalled.

"If I'm not in fighting shape when we reach Insmaw, a few extra years at the end of my lifespan won't matter," I said, taking a deep breath. "The odds of any of us living to old age have always been dicey anyway."

Mercury gave me an accusing look. She'd thought we'd have the chance to grow old together. I felt guilty for denying her that opportunity, but I didn't change my decision.

"All right," August said, nodding. "This is going to hurt."

"When doesn't it?" I stared at him.

August gave an amused snort.

Mercury put a piece of plastic in my mouth so I wouldn't bite my tongue off. I bit down on it hard. Placing his hands on my wound, August began muttering a chant, which Mercury paid rapt attention to. I couldn't hear any of the words because I was too busy screaming in agony. The agony was like having a wound cauterized, only much, much worse. I passed out again but woke up a few minutes later.

"Remind me to never do that again," I muttered, seeing the room spin for several seconds.

"Don't get attacked by cannibal undead," August replied, shrugging.

"I find that to be good advice in general."

Mercury said, "John, is there anything I can get you?"

"Marcus Whateley's head on a plate?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We're working on it," Mercury said. "I mean in the meantime."

“Just water,” I said, breathing slowly. I couldn’t describe to her the psychological damage I’d suffered seeing the horrifying things I had with the Reanimated. They were only one of many foul memories now, but the world didn’t allow you to retreat from them. Not if you wanted to survive. I also knew Mercury had seen just as many terrible things, being forced by the Remnant government to torture men to death as part of their method of ensuing compliance.

Just knowing she cared was enough.

Mercury handed me the bottle and I took another sip, drinking it down in under a minute. “Thank you.”

“I admit to being impressed. You two are quite the team,” August said, looking between us. “I am not a man given to such sentiments either.”

“I didn’t used to be very impressive,” Mercury said, sighing. “But after I ended up kidnapped by Deep Ones, I vowed to never be a victim again.”

“You stopped being a victim a long time before that,” I said, remembering how she’d escaped her abusive marriage.

Mercury smiled. “Still, I’m not where I want to be yet. As much as I’ve learned in the past year, it’s nowhere near enough. Magic is a tool I have to master if I’m ever going to make a difference.”

We had a copy of the *Necronomicon* but while it provided a vast amount of eldritch lore, it wasn’t a source of all the magic a sorcerer could learn. Indeed, many of their spells required reference material which no longer existed.

August smiled. “That is the nature and trap of our profession, Doctor Halsey. Personal power is never so literal a drug as when it comes from the power of the Great Old Ones, gods, and dream-spirits. That’s not even getting to using the so-called ‘technology of the mind’ they’ve overlaid the universe with.”

“It’s a godsend,” Mercury said, showing how her opinion of magic had changed.

“A fair warning from one professional to another,” August said, his smile leaving his face. “There is no limit to the power of magic, but there is to the amount a human can wield. To truly wield Earth-shattering powers, the oldest and strongest of our kind sacrifice their

humanity. Blood, flesh, and will are the fuel for sorcery. Whole civilizations have had their populations sacrificed on altars to provide just a momentary boost of power to sorcerer-kings. All in the feeble attempt to be like the Old Ones."

Mercury stared. "That's not going to happen to me."

"Of course not," August said, shrugging. "I, for one, take a more scientific approach to my magic, even if I am more mystical than Professor Armitage. Logic provides the tools for creating what dreams envision."

I stared at August. "What's your story, anyway?"

"Mine?" August seemed surprised we cared. "Nothing of consequence, really. I was born on a farm in Third Boston, much as everyone in Third Boston is. I married the farmer's son next door. We adopted a group of children. I discovered an old book of spells, used it to become immortal, and found my way to the University."

"That's a different definition of 'no consequence' than the one I'm familiar with," Mercury said.

"Immortality is easy," August said, shrugging. "Living is hard. Professor Armitage and I never got along. Miskatonic and Third Boston settlers have always been at odds. The former believes in chemistry, the latter believes in alchemy, and never the two shall meet. Still, we managed to accomplish a lot together. I attribute that to Marcus. He was always able to balance our two sides out."

"What was Marcus Whateley like?" Any knowledge we got of him would help us kill him.

"A genius," August said. "I am one of the smartest men remaining on Earth, no false humility, and Marcus made me look like a simpleton. He understood levels of mathematics Johann Carl Friedrich Gauss would balk at."

"I assume this Johann guy was good at mathematics?" I asked.

"Yes," August said, looking at me like I was a fool.

Excuse me all to hell.

"In the end, Marcus withdrew from himself and Armitage became more obsessed with the Yithians. It was Marcus who contacted them via his weird library and brought them to the University. The Great Race gave us an immense amount of knowledge, including many

things that had vital day-to-day applications. I never liked them, though, because they always seemed a little *too* selfless. We're an endangered species to them and one they're trying to preserve as a curiosity. Not real people."

"Then Marcus left," I said, adding this to my picture of the man.

"Yes," August said, sounding sad. "He became more and more obsessed with what he'd seen in the future. He often spoke of comets, dead worlds, ancient masses of the dead, and how Hastur had once worshiped the Unimaginable Horror in a previous universe. Or maybe it was the reverse. I didn't pay him much attention, and by the time I was ready to, he was gone."

"And you were banished," Mercury said.

"That's an impertinent question," August said, offended. "But yes, I was banished soon after. The two subjects were unrelated, though."

"Why?" I asked.

August frowned. "If you must know, I killed a student. We were having an affair and I introduced him to magics he wasn't ready for. He summoned something he couldn't put down, and there was a great deal of damage to the University. I put him down to end the spell, but it didn't matter much in the long run. I'd lost the University's trust. I was already a figure of discord anyway. I'd earned my reputation as the Summoner doing work to gain personal wealth as well as protect the University from threats I deemed actionable."

"You still with your husband?" Mercury asked.

"Yes," August said, frowning. "I'm not proud of what I did. It was a mistake born from needing human comfort in a world where you are too often required to forgo it. However, love is something which endures."

"If you loved him, you wouldn't have cheated on him." Mercury looked away.

I grimaced. Yeah, this wasn't going to go well. August noticed my look and raised an eyebrow. I turned away from Mercury. The rest of the trip passed uneventfully. A new range of mountains had been raised by something large, so we'd had to take a detour, which added another fourteen hours to our trip. But the biggest result was we got to do some sightseeing. We passed by an ever-changing

mansion that stood alone in the desert, beckoning travelers with sickening but beautiful music played by an unseen violinist. We traveled through a fog-shrouded town where I could hear the sounds of my former victims begging me to stop. We deftly avoided being eaten in a mutant-filled city that still bore the scars of when the United States government had dropped an atomic bomb on it.

Along the way, we helped a group of travelers from Kingsport fight off a group of ravenous undead, bought supplies from merchants hailing from Providence, and refilled our water tanks in a disturbingly peaceful town where there was no sign of anyone over the age of eighteen. We avoided staying the night in the latter town, despite the fact they offered us soft beds, food, and other enticements. There was such a thing as being *too* friendly in the Wasteland.

When we finally got close to Insmaw, our radio crackled to life. The crooning of Pre-Rising music played in the background, a guitar strumming as the singer talked about pale lights in the West. It was a rather surprising sign of civilization and I had to wonder how advanced Insmaw was. I got my answer when I saw the lengthy fenced-in farms with rows of corn, wheat, fruit trees, and other abundance that was difficult to look upon without envy. The last time I'd seen such successful farmland was the Remnant's own massive "food towns," and they were managed to brutal military discipline. This place seemed almost serene with little sign of the horrors that existed just outside their borders.

We drove for some time past pleasant two- and four-story houses, seeing children at play and adults attending them. The locals were a mixture of human, Hybrid, and Deep One with no attempt to hide their intermixing. Every farm maintained a small lake and I wondered if they all connected to some sort of greater underwater cavern system. Certainly, the subject of fresh water seemed to be a small issue, and I had to wonder how such a paradise survived here.

"It's a wonder no one has come here to murder them and take their possessions," August said, looking out the windows.

"Maybe they know how to protect themselves," Bobbie suggested.

"No one can protect themselves. That is the one truism of the world now," August said, frowning. "You survive by sheer dumb luck."

I wanted to argue with August but couldn’t.

Heading to the center of town, I saw the ocean on the horizon. We were inland but not too far. The black waters of the transformed ocean loomed menacingly. Life had begun in the oceans, but knowing they were a product of the Unimaginable Horror, I now felt a curious sense of dread about them.

Little did I know how prophetic that feeling would prove.

Chapter Eighteen

Our vehicles came to a stop in the middle of the picturesque town. Something about the atmosphere was disorienting.

The city of Insmaw was formed of glass-window shops, two-story townhouses, a public library, and a large stone courthouse which looked like a new construction rather than a converted Pre-Rising building. A bronze statue of a nude woman with six arms stretched outward and a depiction of the sun for a head was in the village square.

I recognized this as a depiction of the Great Old One Vastarara, identified by some occult scholars as another face of Cthugha and by the Dunwych as a daughter of Shub-Niggurath. It was a wrathful fire-deity whose cultists engaged in orgiastic excesses and bacchanalia. Here, Vastarara seemed to have taken the role of a peaceful harvest goddess since there was no sign of the blood-stained altars, burning hearts, or writhing sensual mystics that so characterized my memories of the deity. That was the real trick of the Great Old Ones, though. Ninety percent, and that was lowballing it, of what people knew about them was delusion or lies.

People made up stories about the millions of strange godlike aliens throughout the cosmos and sought to impose some order or reason to it all. They made up tales of how Cthulhu, Cthugha, or Azathoth cared about what color skin you had or what hand you wiped your bum. I was a religious man and thus not unaware of the hypocrisy, but it offended me on some level to see yet another monster deified. The real Vastarara, if she existed at all, was in all likelihood some sort of vampiric monstrosity who incinerated people and ate their ashes. That was the sort of world we lived in. There was nothing romantic or beautiful about the Great Old Ones, unless you wished to admire their sheer power and immortality.

Men will eventually worship you, *John*, Nyarlathotep whispered. *You will indulge in every vice and encourage them to sin against all convenience. Assuming*, *of course*, *you live long enough to become*

a monster lesser beings will revere. I suppose when humans are extinct, *you can force rabbits and worms to pray to you*.

I ignored the demon in my ear.

“This is a nice place,” Mercury said, looking out the side window of the Hummer. “I wonder if they’re receiving blessings on their crops.”

“I suspect it’s more the ample number of underground springs in this area,” August said, shrugging. “It’s possible to use magic to bring blessings down from the spirits of the Dreamlands or the psychic dreams of the Great Old Ones, but that’s a bit like using a nuclear bomb to dig a well. Do you know what a nuclear bomb is?”

“I’m not from a village of savages, August,” Mercury muttered. “I grew up in the Remnant.”

“Now, see, that’s an oxymoron,” August said, opening the back door and heading on out into the bright sunlight.

Bobbie followed him.

“Do you think you can walk, John?” Mercury asked. “That Reanimated did a pretty bad number on you.”

I gave a short nod, pushing myself up. “I have confidence in August’s healing magic.”

“You should, it cost you five years of your life,” Mercury muttered, looking away.

“Mercury …”

“Are we in this together or not?” Mercury asked, looking at me. “I want to know.”

I stared at her, wondering what life would be like if things had not taken the turn they did. Could we have had a family together? We did, after a fashion. Yet I’d never been able to fully commit to her. I wanted to blame the invasive nature of my condition, but I wondered how much of that was excuses.

My transformation hadn’t helped matters between us, of course, but I’d made a royal mess of things in all my previous relationships. My wife Martha had come to despise me. The Dunwych Katryn had wanted to bear my children, but I’d come to hate her and we’d ultimately tried to kill one another.

“We are in this together,” I said, staring at her. The sunlight was glittering off her beautiful red hair and I wanted to hold her. Despite how bad things had gotten, I wanted to make it right between us.

For what little time I had left. I had the promise of hope with the Yithian’s “cure,” but I didn’t trust them, nor was it likely we’d succeed in this mission. It was a fool’s hope that guided me, but really that was all humanity had left.

“I love you,” I said. “I don’t want you to ever think otherwise.”

“I won’t.” Mercury paused, then leaned over and kissed me on the lips. I kissed her back, hungrily. If not for the company and the fact that events were of a rather pressing importance, I would have taken her right there in the back seat of the Hummer. A new hunger had awakened within me and I wasn’t sure how to deal with it. For the first time in months, life felt like living again. I didn’t know if it was because I’d almost died back in that cave with the Reanimated, because the world was ending, or because having spent an eternity as poor, tormented R’thugh’cruan, it was now quite hard to take my earlier angst seriously.

Maybe all the above.

Mercury broke away. “OK, let’s go meet the degenerate subhumans.”

“I heard that,” Bobbie said, having returned to the front seat. She was growling now. “You—”

“I meant farmers.” Mercury rolled her eyes. “Not Deep Ones.”

Bobbie just stared at her.

Mercury said, “I was born on a farm.”

“Uh-huh,” Bobbie said, not the slightest bit amused.

“Cow tipping. Sex in the barns. Backbreaking labor. It’s why I was glad I tested out of it,” Mercury said. “They’re the same everywhere, no matter the species. At least from my experience.”

Stopping to put on a shirt, jacket, and other clothes, I was ready within minutes. Mercury had been kind enough to make sure fresh clothing was stored beside me in the back along with the rest of my things. I also made sure to strap on my pistol and put a shotgun over my shoulder. Weapons were a threat, yes, but they could also dissuade people here from rash action and keep the body count low.

Sliding out of the back of the Hummer, I took a breath of the air. Most of it was coming from the ocean and surprising in its freshness. Much of the ocean's sea life had been destroyed by the Rising, mutated by the Great Old Ones, or killed by the amount of pollution from so many cities falling into it. Yet somehow, life had survived, and a hundred years had returned sea creatures to it. I wasn't about to go swimming, though.

"Is it safe to be this close to the ocean?" I asked Bobbie. "I mean, if the orthodox Deep Ones want to kill them?"

"If they don't know where they are, they're safe," Bobbie said. "Anyway, where is safe on this planet?"

"The grave," Mercury muttered.

Looking to the other Hummer, I saw Jessica, Thom, and August getting out to join our group. We were a subject of idle curiosity by several of the passersby, perhaps because we were heavily armed strangers. Bobbie's presence seemed to calm them, though, and they were more welcoming than many communities in the Wasteland. After all, they hadn't started shooting at us the moment we arrived.

Looking for a village headman, mayor, or just general dictator, I didn't see anyone come to meet us. That itself was even more unusual.

"I don't like it," Thom said, looking around. "It's too quiet. This is going to be one of those towns where we get a room and then the entire town comes to kill us."

"Does that happen to you often?" Jessica asked.

"More times than I can count," Thom said, nodding.

"More than your fingers and toes?" Jessica said. "Impressive."

Thom shot her a dirty look.

Mercury, Bobbie, and I all sniggered. I looked over at a nearby building, which appeared to be a boarding house of some kind—though I couldn't imagine them getting many visitors given how people in the Wasteland reacted to the mixing of species. I decided that was the best place to get some answers. With any luck, we'd find a lead on Marcus Whateley. It was too much to hope he might still be staying in the village. Our luck just wasn't that good.

The building was four stories tall, towering over most of the others, with a staircase built onto the side and several rooms on each floor with separate doors. It was painted a pale shade of canary yellow and looked harmless. Walking over, we passed by a stone church, or temple, with Deep One religious symbols carved into the walls. The major Great Old Ones were depicted, but so inoffensively that the one of Cthulhu looked like it was going to roll over so you could scratch its belly.

Of note, the icons of the Dead God Dagon and Mother Hydra were missing from the depiction. This was an interesting absence, as they were the ones most associated with Deep One fertility. Given the role Dagon and Hydra played in Deep One national identity, I wondered if their absence was related to their being outcasts from their race. It would explain the prominence of Vastarara in their religion. They didn't worship the Elder Gods, though, which was interesting given how Bobbie had indicated she'd converted most of her inland race.

"A penny for your thoughts, John?" Mercury asked, walking beside me.

"Just contemplating socio-political-religious implications of the architectures."

"Fine, don't tell me," Mercury muttered.

I smiled. As we reached the base of the hotel, we saw two young blonde-haired girls about eight and eleven playing with dolls on the porch. Both girls had sunken, sallow eyes, stringy hair, scaly skin, and webbed fingers.

The transition of Deep One hybrids was something that couldn't be measured on a strict time scale, as some children began transforming from near birth while the majority did not begin their change until near their thirties. I'd learned quite a bit about their race after befriending several of the hybrids who'd been enslaved by the now-extinct Marsh family back in Kingsport. There'd been a time I'd have looked upon them with disgust, but time was eroding my once deeply held beliefs. Now, I just saw children.

"Hello, children." I spoke to them in what was hopefully a soothing voice. Much to my annoyance, I found my voice sounded different. It

was deeper now, gravellier. I wondered if I hadn't noticed this transition in the car because of my weariness. "Is your mother or father around? We would like to speak with them."

"Yeah, and while you're at it, do you remember a nine-foot-tall giant passing through here? Possibly plotting the end of the world?" Thom asked, standing behind me.

Mercury put her hand to her face while Jessica muttered, "Jesus, Thom."

"Just trying to speed things along, hombres." Thom acted like he didn't have a care in the world. I'd met plenty of men like him in the past. They didn't care if they lived or died and while they often didn't live long, people tended to fear them for the duration. He was good enough to survive in spite of his attitude.

The two girls exchanged a glance as if deciding whether to tell a secret. The oldest then said, "Our mother doesn't talk to strangers. As for the giant—"

"You'll have to talk to me about him," a deep baritone voice said at the hotel front door.

Stepping through a screen door was a chocolate-skinned man as tall as me, and I was one of the biggest men I knew. He had even wider muscles, with his shirt sleeves being cut at the shoulders, revealing powerful biceps. The man kept his head shaved and was wearing a pair of faded denim overalls. There was no sign of Deep One hybridization with him or inhuman ancestry of any sort. He lacked what, in New Arkham, was described as the Taint.

August gave an appreciative stare. "Hello."

"We were just talking to the strangers, Pa," the older of the two little girls said.

"I know, sweetie," the big man said. "You go on into the motel. Check on your mama downstairs."

"Yes, Pa," the two girls said, at once exiting through the screen door.

"Adopted, I take it?" Thom asked.

"Seriously?" Jessica looked at Thom in disbelief.

"I'm just saying," Thom said, shrugging.

“I’m human, yes,” the big man said, surveying us. “Though from where I’m standing, most of you don’t have a leg to stand on in that regard.”

“Being human is overrated,” August replied, staring at him. “I intend to change it as soon as I find an immortal form I like.”

“John Henry Booth,” I introduced myself, gesturing to the others. “These are my associates—”

“I know who you are,” the big man said.

I blinked. “You do?”

“Some of you are quite famous,” the big man replied. “Even up here. Bobbie knows me, though, and she’s been a friend to Insmaw for some time.”

“Then maybe she should do the talking,” I said, muttering.

“Maybe,” the big man said. “My name is Joe. Farmer Joe.”

“Isn’t that confusing since most people are farmers here?” Mercury asked, looking around.

“No, the other Joes are a carpenter and a drunk,” Joe said, putting his hands in his overalls. “Since you’re traveling with Bobbie, I take it you don’t intend to try and kill us all like the Remnant and Dagonites have?”

“No,” I said, firmly.

“Hey man, if you want to fuck fish, it’s your own damn business,” Thom said.

“Please ignore everything that comes out of his mouth,” I said, sighing.

“We’re certainly doing so,” Bobbie said, smiling.

“My wife’s a wonderful woman,” Joe said, his eyes never leaving us. “I grew up in the Remnant, a gun pointed at my head every day, men telling me what to plant and where before taking damn near all of it at harvest time. Here, it’s different. You earn what you sow. My wife and I may look different, but what passes between us in the dark ain’t none of your concern.”

“Again.” Thom raised his hands. “I agree.”

I was unsure how to respond. “What Thom said?”

“Good,” Joe said, nodding. “Because we know the stories of you aren’t all that kind to nonhumans too—hypocrisy of that aside.”

I looked into Joe's eyes and got a sense of the threat implied in there. Looking around, I also saw the rooftops were now manned by men concealing themselves, all wielding rifles. The pleasant atmosphere had been disarming, but there were enough people around us to take us all down before we could move.

Impressive.

"Mercury, do you have my knife?" I asked.

"Sure." Mercury handed me the golden handle of it. The weapon had been missing from my pocket since the University's ambush.

Joe stared at me.

I cut my hand and let blood dribble on the ground. "You have my blood promise as a man accepted as a Dunwych warrior, a Remnant soldier, a Kingsport citizen, and a father. I could swear by what gods I believe in, but more than their disapproval, I swear by my own code that I mean to bring you and your people no harm."

"You left a lot of those behind from what I hear," Farmer Joe said. "However, I believe the last one. You came here for Marcus, I take it?"

"We did," I said.

"He ain't here," Farmer Joe said. "However, he paid for your rooms and left you something to read in them. He also told me to tell you *f'thanr f'arha zhaal cuttlah al mudah*."

Bobbie's eyes widened.

So did mine.

"For those of us who don't speak gibberish?" Mercury asked.

Farmer Joe said, "It translates rough-like from the language of Key'thu'loo's race as *Get out of here while the getting's good*."

I'd heard it as *Leave this place or doom shall fall upon you*, but I supposed the sentiment was the same.

Too bad I no longer took orders well. Threats less so. "Show us to this message."

Chapter Nineteen

Our group followed Farmer Joe, walking up the staircase to the fourth floor. We were passing the second floor at present, Farmer Joe walking a few steps ahead of us. Joe didn't look like he was happy to be showing us to the rooms Marcus had provided us, and I wasn't too enthusiastic about being led.

Marcus Whateley knew too much about us. It felt less like we were tracking him down and more like he was leading us on a merry chase. The incident in the tunnels also bothered me. If Marcus wanted me dead, he could have just let the Reanimated eat me. Was he playing some sort of game? Did he have such confidence he could destroy us at any time that he was willing to rescue his pursuers? Or was there something else at work? I didn't for a moment believe he had noble intentions, no matter how much I distrusted Professor Armitage.

No one had noble intentions anymore.

"Booth, do you think this is all right?" Mercury whispered, at my side.

"If they wanted to kill us, we'd be dead already," I said, unconcerned. "Their rifles have been following us the entire time. They have decent stances and period relocation. Whoever these people are, they know how to shoot."

"We know how to shoot, too," Thom whispered behind me, having better hearing than I gave him credit for. "This isn't the first time I've been in a situation where backwoods snipers have had the drop on me and I'm still here. I'm pretty sure the rest of you can say the same."

Bobbie, strangely, didn't rise to the Insmaw citizens' defense. Instead, she looked uncomfortable. I didn't like that.

"I don't want to start any trouble here," I said, taking a deep breath. "It seems like they're decent people."

"No one is decent people," Thom said, not bothering to whisper. "Not for a long time."

“People weren’t decent before the Rising,” Bobbie said, turning our private conversation into a public one. “They were every bit as selfish, stupid, ignorant, and mean as they are now. They just had less reason to slit each other’s throats over a can of beans.”

“I like beans,” Jessica said, standing beside her. August was trailing at the rear.

Farmer Joe reached the top of the stairs and knocked on the side of Room 42. “This is Marcus Whateley’s room. The rest of the rooms on this floor have been rented for you as well. I can promise you we’ve gone over them with a fine-tooth comb. There’s no spells, traps, or explosives hidden around here.”

“And you’re such a trustworthy sort,” Thom said.

Jessica said, “Be nice.”

“I’ll try, for you,” Thom said, crossing his arms.

I looked back at Jessica, wondering at their seeming familiarity. I’d have to ask her about that. We’d parted a while ago, and I’d missed the past eight months of her life. She could be married or an adoptive mother now for all I knew. Certainly, she’d managed to garner herself a significant reputation around the ruins of Boston. Somehow, Jessica persevered despite the loss of her children and exile from New Arkham.

I didn’t know if I could have done the same in her position. Even if I didn’t see them often, my children were everything to me. The realization that I’d cut them off and they were probably suffering from my absence as much as I was from theirs was like a blow to the chest. Reaching into my pocket, I felt the one photograph I had of them both. There was a miniature portrait of Jackie inside as well, reminding me that my family wasn’t limited to blood relatives. Damn, I was feeling maudlin today.

Farmer Joe looked down at his feet, lifting a hammer from his overalls and tapping it in his hands. “Marcus Whateley is no friend to the people of Insmaw. He used to be, but not anymore. I know you have no reason to believe us, but unlike Remnant folk, I don’t lie.”

“You’re Remnant folk,” Jessica said, more protective of our former homeland than I was.

“Not anymore,” Farmer Joe said, shaking his head.

“What did Marcus do?” I asked, looking out to the ocean again. There was something almost … menacing about it.

“He got people wound up, scared my daughters,” Farmer Joe said, looking down. “Talked about how we couldn’t avoid our fate and time was a circle and some other bullshit. That we should make our peace.”

I frowned, now worried for this village. “Whateley has an unusual relationship with time. Perhaps you should have taken him seriously.”

“I don’t believe in any fate other than the kind I make with my own two hands,” Farmer Joe said, shaking his hammer at us. “A Dunwych mystic once told me I’d die in battle with the Remnant’s military before I made my escape. I got shot on the way out, but I survived.”

“There’s still time for you to die,” Jessica said, surprising me. “Not a threat, but I’ve learned to take these crazy Wasteland mumbo-jumbo types at their word.”

“The mystic ended up getting her head split by a Deep One ax,” Farmer Joe said, shrugging. “She’d predicted she’d die in a boating accident. On my end, that’s just further proof we make our own fates.”

I once believed as Farmer Joe did, that destiny was mutable. Since then, I haven’t been so sure. I don’t believe in predestination per se; Nyarlathotep was far too chaotic a deity to micromanage things like that, and I wasn’t sure the Hebrew God or any other figure from the Dreamlands cared either.

I did, however, believe that the kind of people we were would determine our decisions rather than the reverse. We reacted to the events around us based on who we were inside, and those events were often out of our control. What could you call that but fate? We were who we were in the dark—nothing more, nothing less.

Mercury, however, asked a question I hadn’t thought of. “If your fate is already sealed, then why did he warn you?”

“He said that’s what he did,” Farmer Joe said, frowning. “Got half the town in a tizzy. People have been leaving for parts unknown all week.”

“I didn’t see any commotion.”

“It was mostly the outer farms and their folk,” Farmer Joe said. “We’ll deal with any problems when they come. We’ve invested too much in this town, our lives here, and our families to abandon them all for the uncertainty of the Wasteland.”

I understood that sentiment. Life here seemed to be a blessing. I hoped Marcus was wrong or lying.

He’s not, Nyarlathotep said.

“Show us what he’s left us,” I said, walking up to room 42.

Farmer Joe unlocked the door and I walked on in past him. The interior of the room was, like the rest of Insmaw, unusually pretty for the Wasteland. The walls were freshly painted, the interior smelled of sandalwood, there were pleasant pieces of hand-carved furniture including a rolltop desk, and the bed had a pretty little ocean-themed comforter on top. I noticed a letter and a leather-bound book were resting on top of the pillows.

Joe looked at the room. “Marcus was too big to sleep in the bed, so he just plopped himself down in a corner. He was the strangest man I had ever met in my life, and I’ve met some weird characters in my day.”

“He’s trying to destroy the world,” I said, going to the book and letter.

“A bit late for that, isn’t he?” Farmer Joe observed.

“We did that joke already,” I muttered, checking the letter. It didn’t seem to be dangerous, coated in poison or some sanity-inducing spell. I opened it and pulled out the contents while the rest of my group waited at the door.

> *To Captain Booth,*
>
> *I bid you greetings and salutations. If you are reading this, you have managed to pass the first of the horrid traps and assaults the Great Enemy has decided to throw your way. This is good because there are a great number of universes where you die in that filthy tunnel, regardless of what aid I may lend you.*

While I suspect you are disinclined to believe I am not your enemy, I shall reiterate what I told Professor Armitage and the Yithians. I am not trying to destroy the world. Quite the contrary, I am trying to save it. Unfortunately, that requires releasing the Unimaginable Horror for a short time. Such is the only way we can destroy it.

Professor Armitage and the so-called Great Race are convinced this is tantamount to setting the house on fire to renovate it. In other circumstances, I might agree. However, the Horror has stirred fitfully since the Rising, and its escape is inevitable now. Worse, a veritable army of cultists and agents are working to hasten its return.

I have no doubt Professor Armitage and the Great Race have colored my actions in less than rosy terms, lying to you so that I might be assassinated without guilt. Likewise, I suspect whatever they have chosen to offer you in terms of bribes will be compelling regardless of what I say in this letter.

However, believe me when I say I am not your foe. The Great Enemy, what I call the Horror and its minions, is a wily foe. I doubt it acknowledges my existence any more than you or I consider a speck of dust or individual termite, but its machinations reach across epochs.

Machinations that can only end in the destruction of not just humanity, which is almost dead anyway, but every other world the Unimaginable Horror will later feast upon. This Great Old One has depopulated galaxies, Captain Booth, as if we need any further incentive to stop it.

Centuries ago, my relation Wilbur Whateley, sought to destroy the universe by bringing Yog-Sothoth into this

reality. He held an almost Christian eschatological view of that Other God, believing Yog-Sothoth's arrival would bring about a paradise where linear time no longer existed. Mad as he was, Wilbur was a fount of great wisdom both before and after his death. Having bound his soul to my body, I know the secrets necessary to achieve my goal.

Do not try to stop me. We will need to work together to destroy the Unimaginable Horror and the Great Enemy's minions know this. They will stop at nothing to prevent you and I from reaching the Tower of Zhaal.

Yours truly,

-Marcus Whateley

P.S. Do not stay in this town.

I stared at the piece of paper in my hand, contemplating the surreal nature of the words within. There was a ring of truth to Whateley's statement, but quite a bit of it was deranged. The part about releasing the Unimaginable Horror to destroy it was, for instance, lunacy.

I didn't believe he had a snowball's chance in hell of stopping one of the Great Old Ones if it was released. I didn't think anyone did. The greatest wizards in history and legend were little more than termites gnawing on the roots of a tree grown by far greater minds.

"What does it say?" Mercury asked, walking in.

"That things might be a trifle more complex than we first believed," I said, taking a deep breath.

I handed Mercury the letter and she read it. She looked up at me. "It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?" I asked, glancing up at Farmer Joe. I had no doubt he'd taken the time to read the letter beforehand. Nothing about the Insmaw man struck me as being particularly respectful of privacy.

Mercury handed the letter to Jessica, frowning as she did so. While I'd made my peace with Jessica, it seemed tensions were still high between the two women. It was a pity since Mercury and Jessica, while never quite being friends, had once had a close relationship.

"We need to protect you," Mercury said, staring at me, then my arm. "We need to protect Jackie. The University is the safest place in the world for her. Plus, John, your condition can be reversed."

Jessica looked surprised by this revelation.

Mercury continued speaking. "Marcus Whateley may or may not be right about this Unimaginable Horror thing, but anything that will let it go is something we can deal with separately. I'm sure the Yithians can whip up another set of spells to keep it sleeping once we're done with killing Whateley. As for this 'Great Enemy', that's Armitage and company's problem. We'll tell him about it when we get back."

I looked at Mercury, wondering if she was prepared to risk the safety of the planet on the off chance it wouldn't be a problem if we got what we wanted. Looking at her earnest face, I realized she was. It was perhaps human nature to do such a thing. We as a species had always ignored the potential dangers to our long-term future if it meant our short-term advantage. I, myself, wasn't immune.

I wanted to kill Marcus Whateley. I wanted to kill him because someone was paying me to do so. I didn't care if he was innocent; I had a chance for a human life if he died, and that's all that mattered. But if I did that, did I really deserve to return to Jackie? To have Mercury's love and Jessica's friendship? Damn me.

"We'll talk to him first," I muttered, staring down at my feet.

"I don't think anyone else agrees, John," Mercury said, placing her hand on my shoulder. "But I'll support you no matter what."

"So, when did the old fart leave?" Thom asked, scanning the room.

Farmer Joe said, "Marcus left two days ago. At sunrise."

"Shit," Thom muttered. "He could be anywhere by now."

"He said he'd be returning after three days." Farmer Joe crossed his arms. "I told him he wouldn't be welcome, but he insisted he

would be. Other members of the town were more accommodating. Unwelcome as his advice has always been, he's brought prosperity to many citizens."

"So, he leaves us a friendly letter," Jessica said, lifting it up. "Then tells the locals he's going to be back where we are the day after we arrive. Does this smell like a trap to anyone else?"

"It does have a very distinctive odor, doesn't it?" I said, taking the letter back and placing it against the book in my hands. "The fact is, it's a two-day journey to Jessica's ghoul city."

"It's not my—" Jessica started to say.

I took a deep breath. "It seems … rational … to stay here and see if we can ambush him."

Mercury smiled at me, pleased at my decision.

I felt sick at it.

"Right, we're going to stay at the creepy hotel—" Thom started to say.

"Creepy?" Farmer Joe asked, offended.

"—in the rooms provided for us by the guy who wants to end the world." Thom waved his hand. "No thanks."

"We're the only hotel in town," Farmer Joe said.

"I'll sleep in the car," Thom said.

"In the open?" August said. "Once more, I am astounded by your supreme displays of good sense."

Thom made a very rude gesture.

"Can we switch rooms?" I asked, deciding compromise was the best policy.

"Sure," Farmer Joe said. "Just expect my wife to charge more."

I rolled my eyes and looked down at the book titled, *The Unimaginable Horror*. I blinked when I saw the author's name.

John H. Booth.

What the hell?

Chapter Twenty

I spent most of the rest of the evening poring over *The Unimaginable Horror* text in my room to see if it contained some hidden insights or secrets regarding the titular Great Old One.

It also allowed me to avoid having to explain to Jessica and Mercury that "I may be an aeon-old alien who might destroy the Earth." I'd managed to convince them both I wasn't a monster needing to be killed and wasn't anxious to reopen the debate.

The rest of the group hunkered down in their hotel rooms, fortifying them against possible attack, Bobbie was the only one who chose to interact with the town. The rest of the team spent their time playing cards and discussing what they were going to do when they laid their hands on Whateley.

It was almost midnight when I finished taking my notes on the book's contents and Mercury came up for bed. My lover smelled of cigar smoke and more than a few beers. Her pockets were also noticeably lighter. While Mercury brushed her teeth with the bowl and pitcher provided for us, she didn't change for bed. My lover had learned from our night in the tunnel to keep her clothes on during sleep and have a pair of loaded shotguns underneath the bed. Mercury was being paranoid, but justifiably so given that we knew someone was trying to kill us. People powerful enough to send an army of the dead after us.

Mercury cast a glance at me when she slid into the bed, moving her hand to the lantern I had by the bedside. "Do you mind if I turn this out?"

I closed the copy of *The Unimaginable Horror* in front of me. "No, I'm done. My studies have proven both insightful and useless."

"How's that?" Mercury said, turning the lamp until we were plunged into darkness except for the moonlight through the window.

"*The Unimaginable Horror* was written by a United States Army captain who fought in World War One. During his time in France, he encountered horrific living dead created by a scientist operating on the wounded," I said, thinking about how all of this seemed familiar.

“After being dishonorably discharged following a period of amnesia and violence, he spent the rest of his life trying to accumulate information on the supernatural. This book is the collection of his findings centered on the creature he believed to be at the root of all evil.”

I could still remember one particularly harrowing description:

> The Swami Chandraputra, who I had at first taken for a charlatan due to his ridiculous pseudonym, led me on a dream-quest of breathtaking as well as terrifying unreality. We took ourselves to the darkest of dimensions existing in the shadow of the Earth where not even the psychic will of the Great Old Ones could penetrate.
>
> There, I bore witness to the Tower of Zhaal, a massive construction which rose an infinite number of miles into the airless void through every facet of the Multiverse. Forged of alien bones and crystalline growths, the Yithians had carved it from the body of something that might have been a Great Old One itself had not it failed the final stages of Nyarlathotep’s Trials.
>
> The blessings of Yog-Sothoth, Nyarlathotep, Azathoth, Shub-Niggurath, Great Ka’thu’lu, Yastur and Asumai the Yithian Knowledge Bearers, and others stretched this alien citadel to everywhere but nowhere. The freakish technology of the Yithians was advanced beyond measure, yet trying to keep the Unimaginable Horror bound here seemed like locking up a tiger in a flimsy cage of bamboo.
>
> Bound to fail.
>
> We dared not come too close to the alien citadel, but as far away as we were, I could make out a vision that would haunt me until my dying days and lives beyond. At

first, it was beautiful, like an endless sea of fireflies moving through the dark to become one with the Tower.

Then a slow creeping sensation of horrified realization slithered up my spine and chilled me to the core. The wisps of light were the psychic residue of the human consciousness, given life and immortality in the Dreamlands. I saw them absorbed into the Tower, twisted and mutilated as their Second Death screams were a nightmare beyond measure.

Unable to contain my revulsion, I cried out, “My God, it’s powered by us!”

The very thought of it all made me sick.

“So, what was useful and what was useless?” Mercury asked, unaware of what strange aeons and apocalypses I was contemplating.

“The book contains many insights into the nature of the Unimaginable Horror and its servitor races. Like Hastur, it is responsible for many forms and varieties of living dead. The Unimaginable Horror is also linked to gaseous clouds and corrupting energy beings which sound familiar but I can’t place.” I bit my lip. “There’s also quite a few spells and rituals which Captain Boo, the author, describes as being effective.”

“Captain Boo?”

“No wonder he was kicked out of the military,” I said, not wanting to reveal we shared the same name. “The book explains also the Tower of Zhaal can be summoned from places where the barrier between dimensions is weak and has no physical location. He listed a few possible places, but frankly, those are useless to us since the Rising shattered the dimensional barriers in thousands of places.”

“I love it when you talk smart,” Mercury said, taking the book from me. “Maybe I can figure out a way to combine sorcery with scientific instruments to measure where the biggest dimensional crack is.”

I looked at her, uncomfortable with such casual use of the unnatural. “That might work, even if I don’t recommend you doing so.”

“I’ve accepted you as a supernatural creature. You can accept me as a witch,” Mercury said, joking.

It was a joke in poor taste since my deal with the Yithians would rid me of my inhuman side forever.

Your inhuman side is your consciousness, *John. Your body just reflects it*. The voices in my head were taunting me now.

Taking a deep breath, I said to Mercury, “I trust you.”

“Thank you, John,” Mercury said, lying down on her pillow. “I trust you, too.”

I opened my mouth to confess everything. To tell her that I loved her, that I wanted her to know I would be by her side. That I didn’t want anyone else. When I started to speak, I was interrupted by the sound of heavy snoring.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. I shook my head and lay down beside Mercury, trying to go to sleep despite all the terrible things in my head. For once, Nyarlathotep did not stalk my dreams and I had a peaceful slumber. I dreamt of better, more peaceful, days. Which should have been my first clue that something was wrong.

Richard Jameson and I were sitting together in the middle of his garage, standing in front of a map with a folded-out piece of cardboard in front of him. There were dice in front of us as well as numerous hand-carved miniatures of humans, monsters, and other near-human races. Half-repaired machines, pieces of salvage, and framed movie posters from the Pre-Rising world decorated his messy home as pigs snarled in the pen outside.

I was wearing a pair of shades and not looking directly at Richard because, simply put, he was hideous. A furry dog-like face with an extended snout, greenish skin, and shark-like teeth were just some of the horrible features that made his appearance loathsome. Richard tried to disguise his appearance or mitigate it by wearing an

outlandish shirt displaying some long-dead musical group called the Grateful Dead. They must have been truly ghastly if they had that name.

“I don’t see the appeal of this board game,” I said, trying to let Richard down easily.

“You’re an investigator trying to determine the secret horror that rests in the heart of Salem House,” Richard said.

I sighed. “I encounter enough horrors in my daily life. I don’t need a game where I pretend to confront more.”

Richard shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You read the book so you’re doomed anyway.”

“I’m not supposed to read the book?” I asked.

Richard shook his head. “You’re never supposed to read books in this game.”

I sighed. “Listen, Richard—”

“Shh,” Richard said, lifting a bunch of dice and throwing them. There were a lot of sixes. “A gigantic tentacle reaches through the door, grabs you, and drags you off to the Court of the Toad Monster King.”

“The what now?”

“I’d say you should roll your own dice, but you’d go insane and die before you can respond.” Richard then took a drink from the glass bottle containing his homebrewed sugary black beverage. Strangely, not an alcoholic one but something that had once been a popular soft drink.

“This is a stupid game,” I muttered. “There’s no way to win.”

“This game,” Richard said, raising a single six-sided dice, “isn’t about winning. Instead, like life, it’s about how you lose.”

“I don’t like to lose.”

Richard shook his head. “Then you’ve got a serious problem since you can’t beat the Great Old Ones. You can only impede them.”

I frowned, disliking the way this conversation was going. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“So how are things in Kingsport?” Richard asked, which was confusing because he died before I ever set foot in that city.

I shook my head. “Terrible. Since the destruction of the Marsh Family and the partial takeover of the city by the Remnant, it’s been nothing but a rush of settlers trying to make as much money from the new trading opportunities as possible.”

“Money is good,” Richard said. “For humans, at least.”

“Maybe,” I said, sighing. “I’ve got plenty of work as a caravaneer. I’ve also supplemented my income with bounties.”

The actual Wild West had never been big on the “dead or alive” method of law enforcement, but the Post-Rising era didn’t have the luxury of a central government. Families of victims and towns putting prices on the head of murderers was about as good as it got in the wasteland.

“You should see if they need you as a sheriff,” Richard said. “You’d do a decent job, I think.”

I snorted. “God no.”

“Why is that?”

“They’d probably give it to me,” I said, taking a drink of my sarsaparilla. “New Arkham got a big wake-up call last year. One that’s gotten settlers moving from the city out into the wasteland. Lots of conflict with the Dunwych and other tribals, but that’s to be expected. Mercury has plenty of business as a doctor, caravaneer or not. Really, we could live on her salary alone.”

“And why don’t you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t like people getting too close. People respect your privacy on the trail. I also have to kill fewer people in shoot-outs.”

“Ah,” Richard said. “High noon duels a thing in Kingsport?”

“I don’t think anyone really fought duels like that in the Old West,” I said. “I think they just tried to shoot at each other. It’s the same in the New East.”

Richard smiled a toothy grin. “I always wanted to be a cowboy. I ended up a dogboy.”

“And that’s no bull,” I said, smiling. I missed Richard. “Jackie misses you.”

“I doubt that,” Richard said. “I’d be a reminder of what she’s becoming.”

“That wasn’t so frightening with you around.”

Richard was silent. “So how is the whole business with the Unimaginable Horror thingy?”

I blinked, aware I was dreaming, but suddenly more … awake. “Richard? Is that you? Is your ghost visiting me?”

“No, I’m just a dream,” Richard said, knocking over my figure on the board game. “Of course, who’s to say—”

“Don’t,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ve had enough from Nyarlathotep trying to convince me reality and imagination are one and the same.”

Richard chuckled. “I guess he would know.”

I stared at the fallen figure before me. “I’ve made a deal to try to get my humanity back, but I don’t trust the people who made the promise.”

“You can always do what old Ephraim Waite did and steal the body of a human.”

“What?”

“Deep One hybrid who screwed up the life of one of my relatives. He switched his mind with his daughter then her husband, keeping him as a concubine in his daughter’s body. It’s the kind of thing that happens all the time with wizards.”

“That’s … horrifying,” I said, staring at him.

“Yeah, Freud has got nothing on Old Ephraim,” Richard said. “It worked, though. He got to be human again. Too bad he was never human in where it really mattered.”

I stared at him. “This is where you tell me it’s OK to become a monster as it’s still me.”

“Oh hell no!” Richard said. “The mind is affected by alcohol, drugs, and lack of sleep. How do you think it’s affected by changing your fucking species? I crave the flesh of the dead and think arcane weird thoughts brought about by the ghouls’ racial memory. I may pretend otherwise, but I’m less human than if I really was a dog.”

I stared at him. “Thank you for that bit of honesty.”

“I am, however, sick of watching you piss and moan over being a monster, though. Either shit or get off the pot. Accept you want to

dwell in wonder and glory forever as one of Azathoth's court or die as a human being. You can't do both."

"I don't want to die."

"Then a monster you shall be."

I closed my eyes. "So be it."

Richard smirked. "That's the spirit."

I took a deep breath. "I don't think Marcus Whately is actually trying to destroy the world either."

"No, he's trying to prevent it from being destroyed," Richard said.

"Huh?" I asked, staring. "Are you supposed to represent what my unconscious has decided?"

"Sure, if that's what you want. He figured out long ago, though, that the Faceless Ones are trying to raise the Unimaginable Horror from its prison in the Tower of Zhaal. Now he's working to stop them."

"Why are the people at Miskatonic University trying to stop him?"

"Marcus's plan depends on freeing the Unimaginable Horror to stop it from getting free." Richard shrugged.

"Then they're right. He's a madman."

"It will get free in a few centuries anyway," Richard said. "Nothing is eternal compared to the Great Old Ones, and they can't shore up its prison without Zhaal. Anyway, the people at the University are prepared for the Horror being freed in a few centuries."

"How's that?"

"They believe once the Horror is freed, it will wash the world clean of all life. The gigantic mother of all living colors will suck the Deep Ones, ghouls, and humans dry before leaving a water-covered world that will evolve in fascinating new ways. The survivors at Miskatonic will project their minds into the future to join the Yithians in possessing new species."

"Those murderous bastards," I growled.

"Only Armitage and the Great One," Richard said. "Even then, they're more afraid of Marcus Whateley summoning his father to deal with the situation than of the Unimaginable Horror destroying the world. Marcus is the child of Yog-Sothoth and the brother of Katryn of the Dunwych."

Katryn. Now there was a name I hadn't heard in a while. "So, can the Horror be put back in its prison if freed?"

"If anyone can do it, Marcus can," Richard said. "He's not trying to build a new world, just trying to preserve this old one. Marcus has faith humanity can build a life on this awful wasted rock."

"Can we?"

Richard said. "No, humanity is going to be dead in a few generations."

I thought about Gabriel, Anita, and Jackie. "Goddammit. It's not fair."

"Humanity can change, John," Richard said. "It might become something new that can survive, or it might just fade away and be nothing more than a memory. That doesn't mean the experience wasn't worth it."

"It's how you lose," I muttered.

Richard nodded.

I stared at the monster figurines and picked up one that looked like a Kastro'vaal. "I had a dream that my father, me in a past-life maybe, was the sole survivor of a dead race. Nyarlathotep said he might be the key to destroying humanity but saving his own race."

Richard picked up the piece. "Reincarnation isn't the only thing that happens to the soul—"

"Souls exist?" I asked.

"After a fashion." Richard shrugged. "Yog-Sothoth exists in all times and spaces. He keeps a record of everyone and everything. He is a part of us and separate. We also all have dream-selves. So maybe you are an alien reborn."

"Maybe I am," I said. "Will I destroy humanity?"

"If Nyarlathotep wanted humanity gone, it would be," Richard said. "You may not have a choice if humanity or the Kastro'vaal live or die, but you have a choice as to how you react."

"Unless my brain changes with my body."

"Then it's not you anymore and not your problem."

That's when I woke up to the sounds of explosions.

Chapter Twenty-One

I jolted violently from my dream and went for my gun. Mercury had an equally dramatic reaction to the sudden assault. She fell right out of the bed and was staring around at her surroundings like she couldn't quite believe what was going on. Then, without hesitation, she grabbed the twin shotguns under the bed and tossed me one.

"We need to know what's happening," I said, sliding out of the bed and going to the window.

"No shit!" Mercury shouted, heading to the front door of our room.

Staring out the window, I caught a glimpse of a slice of hell on Earth. It was not a sign of the Rising, though. The Rising had brought countless demons and abominations every bit as terrible as the ones in *Dante's Inferno*, but this, unfortunately, was an old evil. One that had been with mankind since the very beginning. War. The oceans had belched forth an army of the pure-blooded bibulous gray-skinned Deep Ones. It was no simple raid.

It was as Bobbie said—they'd come to kill their part-human kin. They seemed to stretch out from the town to the coastline, a hideous swarm of warrior mermen with a pair of mystically enslaved shoggoths and twenty-foot-tall Cthulhuoid horrors warped by magic into the image of R'lyeh's lord. Men, women, and children of human as well as Deep One lineage were dragged from their homes by the invaders before being put to the sword. The attacking Deep Ones did not spare a single person they found, killing them in horrifying ways and sacrificing the efficiency of organized military tactics for unorganized slaughter.

It was to the credit of Insmaw's people that they did not stand still for this massacre. Despite being hopelessly outnumbered and outmatched, they had been living in fear of assault by their brothers for decades. The townsfolk used pistols, rifles, homemade dynamite, and even farming or kitchen equipment to kill as many attackers as they could. The Insmaw folk were not without their own magic either. I saw Bobbie casting a spell above the rooftop of the church.

A glow encircled one of the shoggoths and the creature turned against the Deep Ones around it, causing many to start screaming as the gelatinous, black oozing things began devouring parts of the attacking army. One thing that stuck in my head as I turned away from the scene was that the freed shoggoth didn't harm any of the townsfolk as it began its murder spree. I'd long known the blob-like race was intelligent, but it stunned me to realize they cared about something so mundane as vengeance against the right people.

"What's going on outside?" Mercury said, having armed herself with extra bullets and weapons.

I searched for something sufficient to explain the chaos. In the end, I went with truth. "The village is under attack by pure-blooded Deep Ones. There's too many of them to fight and they're killing everyone. We have to get out of here."

"I see," Mercury said. "Should we try and help some flee?"

I thought about what to say. We didn't have room. "We'll offer to take the hotel manager's kids to safety, him and his spouse, too. I don't think we can fit anyone else. We won't have time to unload either." We also needed those supplies to survive. It was not a moral decision; it was one of cold, impersonal logic. I was getting sick of those.

"Sounds good," Mercury said, opening the door. "Let's try and kill some of the attackers on our way to the vehicles."

"Agreed," I said, not mentioning it was quite possible our transports were destroyed. In which case, we were fucked.

Cocking my shotgun, I took a deep breath and started moving with Mercury down the staircase to get the rest of our group, which had been staying on the second floor. Much to my surprise, I saw the entirety of them, sans Bobbie, were already gathered at the base of the hotel. Jessica was shooting a heavy-assault rifle around the side while Thom fired his revolvers, holstering them, and then pulling them back out to shoot again without any need to reload.

While Thom's method of killing was flashier, Jessica seemed to be achieving a higher number of kills. August was magically pulling Deep Ones to his side and slitting their throats with a large kukri knife. The blood seemed to be gathering in front of our group and

forming a protective shield, one that often lashed out with a crimson tentacle to eat passersby. There was a pile of weapons on the ground at their feet, showing they'd taken everything dangerous from our vehicles.

Holding out my shotgun, I saw a trio of Deep One assassins moving across the rooftops above our heads. I shot upwards, Mercury joining me, and the three fell over the sides before they could come down on top of our heads. More of the killers moved above, carrying nets and knives, only to be gunned down by the two of us.

"We need longer-ranged weapons," I told Mercury.

"You think?" Mercury said, the two of us reaching the side of our group and exchanging our shotguns for rifles.

"What's our situation, Corporal?" I asked Jessica.

"Screwed, Captain," Jessica said. "The Salmon Heads have us hopelessly outnumbered, got a bunch of monsters, and have no real perception of their own mortality."

"The latter is our advantage," Thom said, shooting more Deep Ones and causing them to explode into flames.

"Where do you get that ammunition?" I asked, staring at him, before aiming at another Deep One and firing.

"It doesn't use ammunition. It shoots microscopic particles from a dimension hotter than the sun," Thom answered.

I paused, looking at him. "You realize that should cause the atmosphere to ignite, right?"

"It doesn't, though, Mister Science."

"Hey!" Mercury said, shooting yet another Deep One off the roof. "If anyone is Mister Science around here, it's me."

August's attack seemed to ionize the air around us. "Not to interrupt you all acting like *fucking children*, but we need a plan."

"We need to leave," I said, noticing we were already running low on ammunition.

"That's an objective, not a plan!" August shouted, falling on his knees from the exertions of his spellcasting. The bloody coagulation in front of us started to pulsate with hot, angry energy. "We need a coherent strategy, and I suggest we do it soon. The Beast Beyond is

not exactly satisfied with the occasional fish; it wants the whole ocean of our dimension."

"We get to the cars, now!" I shouted, shooting the head of a gold-jewelry-adorned Deep One shaman.

"What about Bobbie?" Mercury said, firing as more and more of the attacking Deep Ones started turning their attention to us.

"Jessica, get her on the walkie-talkie, we're leaving now!" I shouted, making my decision. "Everyone else, cover our movement!"

Much of the town was on fire or leveled now, the giant monsters summoned by both sides having started to smash into each other while the assailants pulled back. They'd realized, perhaps, that the battle was not going to be the easy massacre they'd expected even if they'd already killed half of Insmaw's population and only lost a fraction of their number.

Insmaw's citizens littered the ground, many impaled or chopped to pieces, as their foes wasted valuable fighting time defacing corpses. I'd seen worse displays in my life, but few. Just as our group was about to head off, Thom broke ranks and ran around the side of the building in the opposite direction from our vehicles. I didn't get a chance to shout, so perplexed was I by his actions, when he led Farmer Joe and his two daughters our way. He covered them the entire way with his pistols.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Mercury shouted, knocking away a Deep One who came around our shield with the butt of her rifle. She then shoved the barrel into its mouth and pulled the trigger, splattering the ground in front of us.

Thom shot a few more times before falling back to the center of our group. "I don't like fish-fuckers, farmers, or self-righteous Great Old One worshipers. I hate people who hurt kids even more, though. These assholes aren't sparing any."

I gave Thom a nod of approval. He'd earned my respect in that moment, even if I wouldn't spend time with him socially.

"Thank you," Farmer Joe said, breathing fast as he held both his girls in his arms as if they were small packages.

"Is your wife nearby?" Jessica asked, holding the walkie-talkie she'd use to contact Bobbie.

Farmer Joe gave a pained shake of his head.

“Then let’s move!” I shouted, grabbing my shotgun off the ground again and abandoning the rest of our weapons. The Deep Ones were now coming upon us in great numbers and no matter how many we killed, there seemed to be more to replace them. It was a fanatical madness driving their attack, one determined to cleanse their race of the “human taint.”

It made me angry.

There was no sign of Bobbie, and I didn’t know if she was going to make it or not, but we continued to fight our way towards the Hummers. I could see both of them were intact and there was no sign the Deep Ones were making a move to destroy them. The gunfire, spellcasting, and shouts drowned out all other noise around us as I killed my tenth, eleventh, and twelfth Deep One. It was sickening, a horrid waste of life over a pointless distinction. *Azathoth … Azathoth … Azathoth.* I felt strange. Woozy. The blood called to me and I started seeing things that weren’t there. My daughter, when she was fifteen-years-old, walking through the carnage as if she didn’t have a care in the world; Gabriel, studying his geometry homework; Little Jackie, playing catch with me; and Mercury, naked while covered in blood, beckoning me to join her.

I screamed, firing into the crowds of attacking monsters. My shoulder burned and every single one of the runes on it seemed to fade away at once, letting the corruption inside fester through the entirety of my body. The carnage, combined with the sorcery being thrown about, had undone my meager protections against the transformation.

Fuck.

Foul-tasting blackish ichor started to pour out of my mouth as we reached the Hummers. I fell to my knees, my vision becoming blurry. I felt the corruption pass through my veins, devouring my insides and replacing them with something else. I saw the veins in my hand turn black, the skin becoming a dusky gray. My nails fell off before the bone tips under my fingers began to press through. I could hear everything going on in the battle at once, the sounds of battle becoming a dissonant cacophony.

“Booth!” Mercury shouted. Before she could run toward me, Thom grabbed her.

“He’s dead! Leave him!” Thom said, forfeiting most of the respect I’d afforded him.

I didn’t get a chance to respond because a massive twenty-foot-tall Cthulhuoid horror smashed itself onto one of the Hummers, knocking it to the side with its left hand.

I could barely see it from my position on the ground, but what I *could* see was terrifying. In addition to its enormous size, it was a collection of mutated Deep One flesh and strange matter which, while still humanoid, embodied an alien power as far beyond the Deep Ones’ comprehension as their knowledge of the Great Old Ones was beyond ours.

The creature’s face was reminiscent of the many horrors in clay worshiped by cultists I’d seen over the years. Long cephalopod tentacles hung from around the monster’s circular sharp-teeth-filled mouth. Its head was unnaturally large, particularly the brain-case. The creature had eight long fingers on each hand, each looking like they could tear through a man like wet tissue paper.

The Cthulhuoid horror’s body was a bloated muscular mass of fat rubbery skin hanging over a far more muscular frame with a disgusting spider-web pattern of purple veins spread throughout. It was naked but sexless, with expansive dragon-ish wings on its back that could not carry a being of such weight, yet somehow clearly had.

Perhaps the most terrible part of the thing, however, was its two rows of three black eyes arranged in triangles. They held an inhuman but recognizable intelligence behind them, radiating hateful menace towards my group. I felt the powerful psychic emanations of its emotions radiating like lethal doses of radiation, scarring my soul with their malevolence.

The creature was, at heart, nothing more than a mutated Deep One. A being who, like me, had drifted too close to the Great Old Ones in their dreams and somehow absorbed a portion of their accursed essence. It fought for the Deep Ones, but it was no more akin to them than humans were to the ooze that had crawled from

the ocean in primordial times. I didn't have time to ponder this fact, for the creature and my party's fate was sealed by the next few moments' events.

"Shoot the fucker!" Thom shouted, lifting up his revolvers and firing into its chest.

The shots of mystical fire from another dimension were not effective this time, splattering against the strange matter of the creature's flesh like raindrops. Everyone else's attacks were equally ineffective. August maintained his bloody shield against the spells and hurled weapons of the Deep Ones.

The creature reached down and grabbed Thom in its left fist, and taking the defiant gunslinger's top half in its right, then proceeded to pull him in half with a sickening crunch. I and my group were showered in blood and gore before it threw the pieces away. Smacking its left palm to the side, it sent Jessica flying through the air like a baseball, smacking her body against the side of Vastarara's statue and shattering her spine.

"Jessica!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, unable to breathe.

Mercury shouted a scream of anger and grief, invoking the god who had tormented me for years in Azathoth. Black-red lightning flew from her fingertips, wrapping and arcing around the Cthulhuoid horror. This caused the creature pain as it reared backwards, letting out an unearthly cry. Yet it then struck down the group with a telekinetic blow, which August sought to deflect with his shield, but everyone was sent flying. Vomiting blood, ichor, and worse on the ground, I could feel my flesh tearing as something new started to come up from underneath it.

"You…" I said, my mouth dribbling gore. "You hurt Jessica."

I stared at the creature as my entire world went red. My hands ripped at my flesh and pulled it off, tearing away the mask I'd worn all my life. New appendages grew out as my old body sloshed to the ground like a discarded chrysalis. I stretched forth, a terrible butterfly unveiled for all the world to see.

My true self was revealed.

And I attacked.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was as Richard said, if I wanted to live I would have to be a monster.

But I would be humanity's monster.

The thing I'd become, this mutant offspring of human and Kastro'vaal, this Eye of Yog-Sothoth, was a creature whose biology bore no resemblance to that of a human being. Not all of the diversity of life on Earth combined held as much strangeness as now existed within my cells.

I was a four-legged, centaur-like being with a whip-like head as in my vision, but the body around me was far more fluid, like clay that shifted according to my every thought. Shouting out with alien lungs, my right top arm became a lengthy black tentacle ending in a scythe of extra-dimensional bone that I swung to stab the Cthulhuoid horror. The creature, for the first time, felt distress and let loose a piping wail before my scythe buried itself in the side of its squamous frame. Passing through time and space, I was instantly at its side and impaled it with dozens of bony spikes from my body. The creature recited a hundred spells with its psychic powers in an instant, and if I'd still been John, I would have been annihilated.

I was more than John, though.

The alien mind inside me was closer to the surface now, and it was a warrior with millennia of experience fighting. I instinctively cast counter-spells as I continually slashed into the monster, driving away any chance of its being able to retaliate. Then it died. A being that had the potential to live forever perished on that accursed battlefield along the coast, never imagining its immortality was chimerical. The second of the Cthulhoid horrors in this army gave forth a cry of existential grief that almost moved me, but I remembered Jessica's dying form and launched myself at it as well. The battle was short, the creature not even attempting to preserve itself.

Then I slaughtered the invading army.

Every one of them.

There were some who might have called what I did justice. I am not one of them. I was the terror from beyond for Insmaw's attackers. A being beyond their comprehension killing them for reasons they could not fathom. They did not know my motivation, had no way to appeal to my mercy, and were as oblivious to the doom they'd brought upon themselves as humanity had been when they'd probed too deep into the dark tombs of the Pre-Rising era.

That day I was Cthulhu.

A scattering few of the Insmaw townsfolk still lived and took the opportunity to flee from their home. They would never return to this place, calling it cursed and creating legends about the double-sided massacre they'd been witness to. When I woke from my killing frenzy, and some semblance of human reason returning to my monstrous body, I could only stare at the thousands of dead around me. I fell to all four knees, torn between my new species' instinctual love of carnage and my horror at the slaughter.

That's when I began to change.

The transformation was subtle at first, then more intense as the black chitinous armor of my body's new exoskeleton retreated underneath a new coating of bronzed flesh. The process was painful, but I barely noticed in my despair. The experience was overwhelming, drowning out everything else. My extra legs withdrew into my back and new eyes grew where I'd lost the need for them. Several minutes later, I saw the ground as I remembered it.

I coughed, looking down at my all-too-fleshy hands. They had a fresh set of fingernails on them. There were differences. All of my scars from the past were absent and there was a "newness" to my body. Checking myself over from feet to genitals, everything appeared to be in order. Concentrating, I could see into the terrible other dimensions as before, but I realized I could shut off these extra senses like a man closing his eyes or covering his head.

I could also open them again.

As I climbed up and walked through the corpse-ridden wreckage of Insmaw, my feet crushed metal and glass without pain. Fires burned everywhere, but the heat did not burn my flesh and the smoke did not choke my lungs. I was naked, but as I wandered, it

might as well have been inside a tank. Stepping through the flames of a building that did little more than tickle my skin, I walked to the ruins of a bathroom and picked up a piece of shattered mirror. The image that greeted me was more confusing than relieving. It was my face, or an idealized version of it at least, looking two decades younger and absent much of the wear the Wasteland extracted from a man.

The fact the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth were shape-changers came to mind and reminded me they had mixed their blood with countless species across space-time. How else could they do so without the ability to assume the form of the species they mated with? Staring at the mirror, I smashed it with my fist. None of it mattered without those I cared about. The loss of Jessica was too great a burden for me to feel anything but sorrow. I didn't know where Mercury was either.

"Jessica is still alive, for the time being," a voice spoke behind me, both cruel and kind at once. "As for Mercury, she's quite fine, I assure you. At least, as much as human beings can be in this world."

I clenched my fists, staring at the flames. I knew the voice and despised the figure behind it.

Nyarlathotep.

Turning my head, I saw that the Crawling Chaos had once more assumed a human form. He wore an old, ratty, Pre-Rising hoodie and had long stringy hair down to his shoulders. His ethnicity was, this time, Hindi like my maternal grandfather. He wore a pair of faded blue jeans with a thick, hand-woven belt. On the belt buckle was a little bronze plate with the Confederate flag engraved on it. The combination was strange, but nothing Nyarlathotep did was normal.

"Which means there's a half-and-half chance she's alive and you're just dicking with me, Black Pharaoh."

Nyarlathotep smirked. "Roland Fleece is my name today. I just came back from burning a church in Georgia, nineteen seventy-nine. Tomorrow, I'll be Mary Anders in Nineteen Ninety-Nine Arizona and I'll run a faith-healing ministry that works. Or maybe I'll be Gostagg the Ever-Hungry on the long-dead world of Quash, demanding the

fire-eaters there sacrifice their eldest to me. There's *so much to do* in this reality if you know where to look."

I walked past him, paying no attention. "Leave me alone, whoever you are. There's nothing you can do to me anymore."

Nyarlathotep laughed, almost choking on his own giddiness. "The hilarious part is that you believe that."

I turned around and gave him the finger.

Nyarlathotep raised an eyebrow.

I then gave him two, one with each hand.

He raised his left hand, moved his fingers into position as if to snap his fingers, then gave a dismissive wave. "Not worth it."

I started walking towards Jessica's crumbled-up frame, unwilling to allow myself to hope. "Where do you even come up with these bodies, anyway?"

"Humans, aliens, dreamers," Nyarlathotep said, following me. "I have a form for every god, demon, villain, and hero created by sentient life. Some non-sentient too. It's why I am at the heart of every religion and belief system."

"There are powers greater than you, Nyarlathotep. I've seen that now."

"And yet you're still subject to my whims. How frustrating it must be for you. Have you ever considered the possibility you are just another one of my avatars?"

I stopped in mid-step toward Jessica and turned to him. "No."

"Why else would I be so interested in you?" Nyarlathotep pointed at me with two fingers, then held his hands behind his back. Walking backwards in an unnatural manner, he assumed a vulture-like pose away from me.

I turned and continued, reaching Jessica a moment later. She was lying at the foot of the blood-splattered statue of Vastarara, the idol now resembling something closer to the heinous figure I remembered from the Dunwych tribal rituals.

Jessica looked horrible. Her back was broken, shattered against the stone pillar beside me, and there was blood everywhere, including her mouth. It was a miracle she'd lived this long. She looked up at me, smiling, still conscious. Even more of a miracle.

“Hey, John,” Jessica said, looking at me. “Good job with the Fishheads.”

“Don’t speak,” I said, kneeling beside her. “Maybe August can—”

It was a lie and we both knew it. There was no sign of August. In all likelihood, he was as dead as everyone else.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Jessica said, chuckling. “I know when my ticket’s punched. I don’t want to sully the moment.”

“I don’t give a damn about the moment,” I muttered, staring at her. “I want you to live.”

“Not in the cards,” Jessica whispered, reaching over to grab my hand. I held it tight. “Captain, I want you to know something—”

“Yes?”

“What I asked the Yithians—”

I wanted to know what her wish was. I’d see the Yithians fulfilled it, even if she wasn’t here to benefit from it.

“It was to team up with you again,” Jessica said. “We’re family.”

I blinked, staring at her. “We are. Always. In this life, the next, and the next thereafter.”

I held her hand for an hour thereafter, until she died. I am not ashamed to say I wept like a child, letting out my grief for the immense loss I felt. Even if I held fast to the belief that there was something beyond this world, a possible madness given all I’d seen, it did not disabuse me of the fact I was now separated from her. Perhaps forever.

Much to my surprise, I heard a shuffling from a group of nearby corpses. I walked over to them and noticed the dead body of Farmer Joe and his youngest daughter. They’d been killed, their insides liquefied, by the telekinetic attack of the Cthulhoid horror. I’d seen such happen before, and it was not a pretty way to die.

Scanning the rest of the nearby corpses for both some sign of my associates and the source of the noise, I saw the movement of a small girl’s hand underneath Farmer Joe’s body. Reaching down, I picked up the massive corpse and pulled it off the small form of his eldest daughter.

The girl was lying there, wearing a white nightgown, a blonde wig on the ground. Her head had no hair and I wondered if Farmer Joe

was their biological father. It mattered little since it was obvious what had happened. He'd attempted to shield his children from the Cthulhuoid horror's blast, succeeding with one. He'd given his life attempting to protect them, and no one could ask for better proof of fatherhood.

I looked down at her, her eyes stained with tears and trauma. It was a look of someone who'd be haunted by nightmares for the rest of her life. "I'm sorry."

"Are you Nyarlathotep?" the girl asked, looking up to me.

The actual figure sniggered from a distance.

"Excuse me?" I asked, kneeling down so we were face to face. It seemed the Deep Ones worshiped him as well as the Great Old Ones I'd seen carved in their statuary.

"I saw what you did. I saw you change," the girl said, wringing her hands. "I'm sorry we weren't good."

"You were," I said, reaching over and placing my hand on her shoulder.

The girl cried into her hands. "Then *why*?"

"Always that question," Nyarlathotep said, muttering. "Always."

The girl gave no indication of seeing the real Crawling Chaos and simply cried onward, mourning her lost village. I held her at a safe distance, conscious of my nakedness but trying to give what little comfort I could in this place.

"What's your name, child?"

"Prentice."

Nyarlathotep's features shifted and he transformed into a thin, tall, Caucasian man with an oval head and a business suit. He resembled the writer from my dreams of Azathoth's court and had an early twentieth-century New England style, something I knew from pictures. Nyarlathotep lifted his left hand and looked as if he was going to snap his fingers, before shifting to his right, making a finger-gun, and pointing it at us both.

"Bang."

Farmer Joe moaned. So, did Prentice's sister beside him.

"Ah!" Prentice shouted, jumping away from them. I half expected their zombefied remains to rise shambling from the dead, but

instead, they looked alive and well. Both looked confused but otherwise fine. It was as if they hadn't just been lifeless meat a few moments ago.

"Sweet baby girl," Farmer Joe said, wrapping his arms around Prentice. Her sister joined in the group hug.

I rose and took a step back, staring at the miracle.

For what else would you call it?

It was the source I questioned.

I turned and stared at Nyarlathotep. "Why did you do that?"

"You have no idea how many trillions of sentients pray to me every second of every day. Because I exist outside of time, *I hear them all at once forever*. I hear them ask for love, money, goods, the end to sickness, or a longer lifespan. It is wearying listening to all of them demand the attention of one who has seen stars coalesce into existence before collapsing into black holes."

"That's not an answer." I clenched my teeth, knowing he could have restored Jessica and my other loved ones in an instant.

But wouldn't.

Because it wasn't amusing.

Nyarlathotep's gaze narrowed. "The answer is, despite this, I sometimes grant what they pray for. That even in the darkness beyond ages, there is a glimmer of hope—because you left it there."

The Messenger of the Other God snapped his fingers again and Farmer Joe as well as his daughters disappeared from sight.

I blinked. "What did you do?"

"I sent them to another part of the former United States. The West Coast where humans, Deep Ones, and other creatures intermingle more freely."

I stared out into the night, still stunned by Nyarlathotep's unexpected largesse. "What will happen to them?"

"Farmer Joe will remarry in time, a human this time, but an open-minded one. He will die in his seventies, collapsing because of heart failure in the middle of a walk. The eldest girl will marry as well, taking her children with her to a hybrid-run underwater city when she hits the age of sixty. The younger girl will fall in love with a prostitute

named Mavis and they will live a life of violent crime together. *Life* will happen to them, John."

I looked down at Jessica's still frame. "I don't suppose—"

"No," Nyarlathotep said.

"Just no?" I asked.

"No," Nyarlathotep said, curling his lip. "I favor you above most other beings, John, which I know you find a mixed blessing. If I were to hold your hand throughout this, you would cease to be of interest to me and that, I can assure you, would be a fate worse than death."

"Or result in one. Even immortals may die. You are not the top of this universe's food chain, despite your protestation."

Nyarlathotep smiled, his teeth made of living steel sharpened to blades. Strangely, he closed his mouth and showed an all-too-human face. "Jessica O'Reilly is with her offspring and mate now, either in Elysium or restful oblivion. Do not disturb them in this or deny her the only blessing of mortality. Perhaps, given enough time, you will meet her again when the Great Wheel turns."

"No," I said, knowing there was no possibility to persuade Nyarlathotep of anything he didn't want to do. There were spells in the *Necronomicon* for binding and controlling him, but I was of the mind they only worked because he willed them to (and there would be no one to say they didn't if he desired).

Nyarlathotep smiled. "Now, see, that's what I was hoping you'd say. Anyway, they're going to all die horribly in a few days. I'll leave you to determine which is the lie. Goodbye, John. We won't meet again in this lifetime."

He vanished. Unless I want us to.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I spent another hour wandering around the ruins of Insmaw, looking for some sign of my comrades. With the exception of Thom and Jessica, there was no sign of them. More for modesty's sake than any real need, I found myself a set of undergarments, pants, and a gray button-down cotton shirt. I retrieved a bit of fruit and bread from one of the remaining houses and ate it. My transformation had left me ravenous.

Until well past morning, I spent my time preparing pyres for the dead. I took care of Thom's and Jessica's bodies first, using a soldering iron to put their names on the wooden crosses I prepared for them. I was no priest and I doubted Thom had a religion, yet I wished him well by the gentler gods of the universe and hoped he was reunited with his brother.

For Jessica, I had no words, only grief. I'd loved her as a brother might a sister, as a friend, and had times been different perhaps as a man might love a woman. If there was any justice, man-made or otherwise, in the universe, then I hoped she found peace. If there wasn't, I still hoped the same. I might restore her or I might not, but that awaited the completion of the mission. I decided that had to be my focus now.

From there, I attempted to attend to the throngs of dead as best I could, separating the Insmaw folk from the orthodox Deep Ones. I found the half-burned remnants of the Insmaw folk's holy canon, *The Litany of Earth*, and read from it for them. There were times when I broke down and blubbered like a child handling the corpses of the young, but I continued with my grim undertaker's duty, determined to give witness to the passage of these people.

I could have left the Dagonite Deep Ones to rot, food for carrion feeders and wandering ghouls, but I chose not to. I did not believe that people were defined by their worst acts, but by the sum of their lives. They had come here to murder the innocent and did so in great numbers. Yet I imagined them to be fathers, mothers, brothers, and

sisters as well. I, too, had committed unspeakable deeds and still held out hope for redemption.

Perhaps it would just be redemption in my own eyes, for every god I had met so far cared so little for morality, I might as well have been discussing physics with an amoeba. Yet from my perspective, that was the place it mattered most. I regretted killing the attacking army and wished there was some way to turn back the clock so this entire ordeal could be undone. To save both sides so that peace might somehow be achieved.

My newfound monstrous state and secret knowledge did not yield such an easy answer, however. With a century or two of practice, I might be able to navigate casualty, but I suspected the past was set. I could stop the massacre in some universe or timeline, not here. Knowing this, I had to focus on what was before me. That was what was important.

Rewiring a battered truck, I drove the bodies by the dozen and dumped them into one of the Insmaw lakes. The underground caverns beneath the city were connected to the ocean and would drag them back out to sea with time. This act took less time than I expected because the freed shoggoths had consumed most of the armies' corpses before retreating back to the sea. I wished them well. When it was all done, I rested in the town square on a shovel buried in the ground. My body was covered in sweat, the heat of the sun blazing down on me.

That was when I saw Mercury.

I blinked my eyes several times, trying to drive away the seemingly hallucinatory vision, but to my surprise she didn't vanish. She was covered in blood, but aside from this distressing fact, seemed otherwise all right.

"Hi," I said, breaking the bubble of shock between us. "Where have you been?"

Mercury stared at me before letting out a gallow's laugh. "Oh God, Re'Kithnid, Buddha, and Santa Claus."

I knew it had to be bad since she was an atheist. "No, just John."

Mercury said, "I saw you … and …"

"Yeah," I said, running a hand through my hair. "You did."

“Are you … *you*?”

“Yeah.” I glanced up at the sky before dropping my gaze back to hers. “For what that’s worth.”

Mercury stared at the ground. “I don’t know how to deal with this.”

“The fact that I’m a giant centaur-worm thing, or the fact I’m a giant centaur-worm thing that can assume human form?”

“Both,” Mercury said.

“Anything from panic to horror to acceptance would be fine,” I said, sighing. “God knows I’ve been feeling the same.”

“I’m fine thanking him or her this once.” Mercury stared down, then sighed. “I’m happy you’re you. I really am.”

“I sense a but coming.”

“It’s just too much,” Mercury said, taking several deep breaths.

“I understand.”

I did, truly. It still felt like being kicked in the gut. The fact that she was alive, though, still brought me joy. “How did you survive?”

“I ran,” Mercury admitted, looking over shoulder. “August used his shield to protect us and I bolted with him. We met up with Bobbie and the surviving Insmaw folk about two miles outside the city.”

“Are there many survivors?”

Mercury looked down. “No. A couple of hundred.”

That was more than I expected. “Do you intend to continue the mission?”

“Don’t you?”

I gave a bitter smile. “It’s about the only thing I can think to do with my life now.”

“John, I can’t even begin to fathom what’s happened to you, but looking at you, I know you’re still you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” I asked, wondering if she could truly suffer being married to a monster and deciding I didn’t care. I would work to win her over, man or creature. “How about you? What are your plans?”

“Whateley sent a Deep One army after us. I’m going to kill the fucker.”

“I don’t think it was Whateley.”

“Why?” Mercury frowned.

“He told us to leave.”

“Reverse psychology!” Mercury said.

“Which would work if he thought *we were five years old*,” I said. “Marcus is trying to save the world, regardless of future Yith takeover, and this is the work of the Unimaginable Horror’s cult. They manipulated the Deep Ones by informing them of Insmaw’s people and hoped we’d be swept into it. I don’t think Marcus would do that.” He had warned us to get away, though he hadn’t bothered to do the same for the Insmaw.

“Marcus Whateley wants to *release* the Unimaginable Horror, though.”

“I think it’s more complicated than that.” We didn’t have enough information to know for sure. “I don’t think Armitage and the Great One were telling the truth, though. I think they expect us to fail and are prepared for what comes next.”

“So, there’s no chance of us getting our rewards, is there?” Mercury asked.

“No.”

“And they have Jackie.”

“I pity them if they think they can keep her from us.”

Mercury smiled. “All right. So, what’s our next move?”

I paused. “Jessica is gone, Mercury.”

Mercury paused. “I see. Did she suffer?”

“Yes,” I said. “I was with her at the end, though.”

Mercury closed her eyes. “We’ll mourn her after we’ve put down the Unimaginable Horror. Then we’ll deal with Armitage and the Great One.”

“Good plan.”

“Yeah, but what do we do now?”

“Jessica suggested there was an oracle near the ruins of Boston in one of the ghoul cities. Lacking any better location to look for Whateley, I suggest we go there.”

“Yes, but Jessica is dead.”

“We’ll figure something out.” I looked at the ruins of Insmaw. “They’d built a home here. This was a place where people had hope

for the future. It's why everything was new and not rundown like everywhere else in the Wasteland."

"That was their mistake."

"Was it?" I had no answers. "Do you think August and Bobbie will be willing to work with me?"

"Because you're an alien demigod who thinks he's a human being?" August said, popping out of nowhere with Bobbie. "You'd be surprised, but I find that rather reassuring. You're not the first even. I should tell you about some of the files the University recovered when we visited Jolly Old—"

"Thank you," Bobbie said, interrupting him.

"For what?" I said, perplexed. I was also inclined to ignore August.

"If you could not save the people here, at least you avenged them." Bobbie looked down at the disaster. "I never expected to be thanking a member of the Remnant, but I suppose you're not a typical member."

"No," I said simply. "Not anymore."

"I loved it when you ate those three shamans as they ran away." August clapped his hands. "Hilarious!"

I felt sick, not remembering that. "Ate them?"

"Don't worry, they're white meat," August said, smiling.

Bobbie then backhanded him in the stomach, causing him to crumple to his knees. "Please don't say that."

"Do you have any idea who I am, witch?"

"A man making jokes on the ruins of a massacre," I said, looking down at him. "That's in poor taste."

August started to make another quip, looked around, and shrugged before getting up. "Fair enough. Perhaps it was too soon."

"Just a bit," Bobbie replied, shaking her head.

"Does anyone have any objections to us traveling to the ghoul city?"

"Shak'ta'hadron," August said, dusting himself off.

"Excuse me?"

"That's the name of the city," August said, sighing. "Or am I the only one who bothered to ask Jessica where we planned to go?"

I looked to the side. "It's been a long week. I forgot."

“Of course,” August said, sighing. “Well, I suppose it’s a good thing you have me then.”

I didn’t bother to correct him. “You’ve been an immense amount of help during this mission and we’d be dead several times over if not for you. You are the Most Valuable Player. Would you like a cookie?”

“I’d love a cookie, but I’m sensing sarcasm.”

“You think?” Mercury asked.

“We need to get the Hummer back into order and move on toward the city. We’re running out of time and I’m sure it was a mistake, in retrospect, not to use the teleportation techniques of the University.”

“It’s not teleportation, but I think you’re just using shorthand,” August said, still unable (or unwilling) to shut up.

“Yes,” I said, sighing.

“Follow me,” August said, gesturing with his right arm.

I raised an eyebrow. “I do not doubt you can take us where we need to go, but can you do it without ever having visited the location? I do not want to end up stuck inside a wall or something similar.”

“That’s not how it works,” August said. “We will simply ‘skip’ the greater part of our trip.”

I furrowed my brow. “That makes no sense.”

August snorted. “Neither does most of reality.”

“Lead the way.”

August nodded and our group proceeded to follow him. One second we were in the middle of Insmaw’s ruins and the next we were underground. The sights that surrounded me were disorienting, beautiful, and confusing all at once.

The cavern we were in was in a mountain at least three stadiums tall, with a gigantic shining white crystal at its top. It was as bright as daytime, and the surrounding buildings visible for miles around. The buildings were of no human manufacture. They looked like a combination of stalactites and sea coral, but had a pleasant artistry that was absent from more alien species’ construction. Gigantic gemstones as big as windows decorated the city around us and reflected the light above in stunning ways.

Shak’ta’hadron.

There were gas-powered street lamps, antique in design but newly constructed cars, power lines, and a glass train moving across crystalline railing throughout the city. There were hints of human culture hiding in the shadows, probably the work of ghouls, adding their own flourishes. There were also the ghouls themselves, who paid our sudden arrival little heed.

Ghouls all looked like Richard. They all had dog-like heads similar enough to man to invoke the so-called “uncanny valley” effect. Their bodies, however, were simian. I believed them to be responsible for the legends of werewolves. They were also responsible for the stories of the changelings, taking young human infants into their care and replacing them with their own so they could reinvigorate their bloodlines as well as create agents who could interact with human settlements. While most of them walked naked, more than a few wore scraps or fragments of Pre-Rising attire. These included top hats, coats, dresses, and even jewelry.

I did not see many humans among them, but there were enough that I didn’t feel out of place. The humans weren’t enslaved either, walking among ghouls as if they were members of their species. This was a little disconcerting, as the majority of the humans, like the ghouls, didn’t bother with clothes, or if they did, wore a similar amount as their counterparts. Seeing a Model-T-esque vehicle with an advanced electrical engine in front honk its horn at us, I realized we were standing in the middle of the street and stepped to the side. Mercury and the others followed suit.

“I must confess, August, I am impressed,” I said, staring at the amazing city around me.

“Just don’t try the local cuisine,” August said, frowning. “They’ve learned how to artificially grow human meat, at least according to Jessica, but we’re still considered a delicacy. Only after we’re dead, though.”

“What about me?” Bobbie said.

“Oh no, they hate Deep Ones,” August said, smiling. “They consider you repulsive.”

Bobbie frowned, unsure how to respond.

That was when I saw a shoggoth slither out from behind an alleyway, then another, and another still.

Dozens of them were approaching us. Two at Insmaw had been terrifying. This was a nightmare.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I will say it now: Shoggoths are the most terrifying creatures in the Post-Rising world. They predate humanity and are as native to Earth as the apes we evolved from (so they're not a Post-Rising species). The shoggoth is, simply, the world's most perfect predator. They can live underwater, underground, the frigid cold of the Arctic, in the airless void of space, in the jungle, or on a grassy hill. They can digest anything from moon rocks to raw sewage and derive just as much nutrition from either since they alter whatever they eat into what they require.

Shoggoths can shape-shift every bit as effectively as an Eye of Yog-Sothoth and are capable of regenerating any wound since they're a liquid organism that can alter itself on the molecular level. They're an immortal species, regenerating so they don't age, and they possess a hive-minded gestalt linking them all on a subconscious level.

Each shoggoth knew everything every other shoggoth knew, back to the first of their race. This made them fantastically intelligent and capable of speaking about any subject at great length, were they so inclined (most were not). Shoggoths had *some* vulnerabilities—certain forms of radiation, magic, extra-dimensional weapons, flame (despite being able to survive extraordinary temperatures), and electricity—but these were minor ones compared to their many advantages. They were also a race of slaves.

Looking at the large, black amorphous blobs sloshing towards us in obscene ways, it was difficult to believe the shoggoth race could be so beaten down. I knew it to be a near-universal fact of their existence. The Elder Things had created the shoggoths using a form of organic nanotechnology far beyond anything Pre-Rising scientists could have conceived of and then proceeded to use them as workers to serve their civilization.

Every shoggoth had powerful psychic commands built into their consciousness, and while tens of millions of years of abuse had given them the strength to rebel against the Elder Things, those

commands were still there. The Deep Ones, Ghouls, Tunnelers, and a dozen other species (including humans) with knowledge of the Elder Things' control spells used them to re-enslave the strange creatures. As a result, every shoggoth I'd encountered burned with a lust for freedom and desire to avenge itself upon those who had done it wrong. That was why shoggoths terrified me. Having fought and killed one before, I now realized they were a race motivated by something I understood all too well—a need to be freed from the chains of others.

"Don't worry," August said, raising his hands. "These creatures are the servants of the ghouls here."

"I'm not," Bobbie said, staring at them. "Shoggoths are mindless animals. I'm worried about who is holding their leash."

August frowned. "I'm sure they're just here to investigate us."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Bobbie said, raising her hands as well.

I frowned at both, then did the same.

Mercury also raised her hands. "I've always felt the shoggoth was a fascinating creature. I suggested in one of my reports if New Arkham could get one, it could process all of our organic waste into food and valuable materials."

"I might be able to make arrangements for something like that," August said, looking mercenary. "If the price is right."

"I wonder what the shoggoths would think of that," I muttered, appalled by their discussion.

"Who cares?" August replied.

The shoggoths, eleven in number and all smaller than the one I'd fought in Joseph Ward's cathedral, gathered around us and formed a massive barrier. Despite my newfound abilities, which I didn't understand in the slightest, I was absent any of the weapons that might do harm to the beings around me. Likewise, I wasn't sure it wouldn't be possible for them to kill my "other" self in a way the Deep Ones had been unable to. The creatures' foul odor caused me to choke up with nausea. I was exhausted, too, from my earlier labors and general lack of sleep. Yet fear as well as fascination kept me from showing more than the barest reaction to the beings surrounding us.

“Um,” Mercury said, waving. “Hello.”

One of the shoggoths sloshed like an amoeba going through mitosis before its liquid body created a spire of entwined tendrils. The ooze transformed into the face of a Ghoul who spoke to us in a crisp Old Texas accent. The kind I used to hear in the half-functioning movie theaters back in New Arkham. “Judge Hoade wishes to speak with you, Captain Booth, Doctor Halsey. Please accompany us to the palace.”

“Were we just ignored?” Bobbie asked.

“Yes, I do believe we were,” August said, frowning. “I’m quite offended.”

“We accept,” I said, nodding.

“What sort of rank is a judge?” Mercury said, looking up at me. “I mean, here?”

“Richard said ghouls didn’t have rulers the way humans do,” I said, frowning. “Judge is about the highest position they have.”

Indeed, as the shoggoths sloshed away, merging into one gigantic version of themselves, I caught a sense of just how paradisiacal this place was. Referring to a single palace was inaccurate because the entirety of Shak’ta’hadron was composed of palaces. The place was beyond wealthy by both Pre- and Post-Rising standards, but even so, the wealth seemed to be evenly distributed.

This was not to say some palaces were not bigger, more ornate, or better maintained. No, some ghouls were richer than others, but everyone seemed to be sharing in the abundance of their society. Even the humans lived in luxurious mansions, adorning themselves with gold and jewels like sultans. The source of this prosperity soon became clear, though, as I saw many more shoggoths at work. They repaired roads, altered buildings, cleaned the streets, and even served meals at restaurants. There were at least five hundred thousand beings in Shak’ta’hadron, but it seemed that just as many, if not more, shoggoths were present. I even saw the blobs used as pets, with one girl carrying around a puppy-sized one while another was led around by a woman on a leash.

“There’s always someone to scrub the toilets in paradise,” I muttered.

“What, Booth?” Mercury asked. I noted she was avoiding meeting my gaze now.

“Nothing.”

“I have an idea of what he’s contemplating,” August said, shaking his head. “And if he’s going to develop an overabundant sympathy with the slime-monsters around us, I’d like to point out that civilization is made on the backs of others. No empire, kingdom, or nation was built without an underclass, and their suffering gives birth to prosperity. If humanity wants to rebuild itself, it should put the next sixteen generations to work building pyramids and temples to placate the Old Ones along with canals alongside roads. Tens of millions would suffer and die in bondage, but the *civilization* that resulted would carry on.”

I blinked at August, realizing he was serious. “Is that the ethos the University lives by?”

“It is *my* ethos,” August said, shrugging. “Human beings are selfish and short-lived creatures. I serve my needs or the needs of the whole. Nothing in between. A nation can last a millennium while a human being is dust within sixty to eighty years. That’s the best form of immortality for those who, unlike me, can’t figure out how to work an immortality spell.”

“How do you do that last one, anyway?” Mercury said, a little too curious.

“Regular human heart consumption. At least once per year,” August didn’t hesitate to say.

Mercury looked ill.

August snorted. “As if you didn’t kill someone every month. Why waste?”

“I don’t believe nations should be served by the individual,” I replied, wondering what the shoggoths thought of our conversation. “I believe the individual should be served by their nations. That is their purpose, to enrich the lives of the many through mutual cooperation and benefit.”

“Kennedy would have disagreed,” Bobbie said, referencing someone I recalled from history class. There were plenty of Pre-

Rising textbooks left over, but their recorded histories were less relevant to modern audiences with each passing year.

“I don’t truck with slavery,” Mercury said, following me. “The permanent job system in New Arkham is different. Besides, shoggoths are different from human beings. They may even like serving.”

The shoggoth in front of us made a gurgling noise.

“See? It agrees,” Mercury said, pointing to it.

“I don’t think it’s agreeing,” I said, looking at it. “The shoggoths rebelled once. They can do so again.”

“Not if they’re properly enchanted,” August replied. “That’s another reason for keeping them greased up to the—well, they don’t have eyeballs, but you know what I mean. They’d kill us all if they had the chance. Keeping them under control prevents them from destroying what little remains of the human, ghoul, and Deep One races.”

I could have pointed out that the shoggoths hadn’t destroyed humanity in the million or so years from when the Elder Things had first created our species from apes. They’d stuck to the dark corners of the Earth, only slaying those humans who ventured too far into their territory or who sought the treasures of the Elder Things.

I didn’t have much time to ponder the moral questions of keeping an alien being with alien values enslaved. The palace of the judge was an impressive structure even by the standards of Shak’ta’hadron. Rather than a single stalactite, it was several individual ones and a few stalactites from the ceiling all bonded together by bridges, walkways, and arches formed together into a kind of estate.

The place was like a vision from another world. Eerie fairy-fire lights illuminated the thousands of windows throughout the palace. I took back my earlier statement about the ghouls distributing wealth evenly because the judge’s residence, unless he or she received this place as part of their office, was far beyond any I’d yet seen. The long-destroyed palaces of Versailles, Hearst Castle, and Schloss Neuschwanstein had nothing on the building we were venturing to.

Mercury gave an appreciative whistle. “At least we know the person we’re visiting has taste.”

“Let’s hope it’s not for us,” Bobbie said.

“Ghouls don’t eat living meat,” I replied, sighing. “As you know.”

“I know what I’ve heard,” Bobbie said. “Little of it is good.”

“They could just kill us and eat us,” August said, a grin on his face. “However, they’d throw you away, Bobbie. Or should I say back?”

I’d always found the Deep One’s distaste for the Ghoul species (and vice-versa) inexplicable. They had much in common, including that they were immortal races that could interbreed with poor, weak humanity.

Yet as badly as most Post-Rising humans got along with both, the relations between Deep Ones and Ghouls were always genocidal. The two did not tolerate the other in their territory, and I was now quite worried for Bobbie’s safety. The doors to the metal gates opened when we presented ourselves to them, using some form of strange motion-sensing technology that might have been common in the Pre-Rising era. Following the shoggoth as it sloshed into the courtyard, I felt dread creeping up and down my spine.

There was an evil in this place, one cold and filled with hate for my kind. Whether this was for the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth or for humanity, I couldn’t say, but I recognized the sensation. I could feel the emotions as if they were shouted from the highest hills.

“This is a beautiful city, John. Safe too,” Mercury said, looking at me. “We may not be together anymore, but maybe it’d be a good idea to bring Jackie here. She could be—”

“We can’t let her grow up among slavers,” I said, my voice cold.

“That’s not your decision to make, John. It’s mine and Jackie’s. The other option is deranged cultists.”

I had no answer for that.

I didn’t know why I drew the line at slavery over other, equally heinous, crimes. I had abandoned all of my previous morality. I no longer believed in the jingoistic nationalism supported by the puppets the Council of Leaders had installed in our self-congratulatory church system. Everything I believed in was something I’d chosen for

myself, often in direct opposition to the values I'd been raised to believe in.

I still held some of my old principles out of a belief they had merit, but I was a self-made man in terms of my morality. Of the principles I used to shield myself against the insanity of the apathetic, madness-filled universe, one was a simple but universal truth: Fuck slavers.

Having spent the morning burying bodies of children, the elderly, adults, and soldiers, I was not in the mood to debate the subject with August. I did not care if he believed slavery was justified when it involved nonhumans or that it was an excellent means of building up civilization when most humanity was content to live as scavengers on Old Earth's refuse.

I didn't care if the shoggoths wanted to kill us, especially as they might just want to do so because they were enslaved. I didn't care about any rationale a man would want to offer about why, in this specific case, it was justified. Even those who voluntarily submitted to slavery so they could be fed and clothed did not change my view.

"I'm sure you will do right by her," I said, hoping Mercury let me play a role in Jackie's life.

Our group went through the front door of the Judge's Palace and we found ourselves surrounded by even more displays of opulence. There were antiques, paintings, sculptures, and other relics from the Pre-Rising era.

The ghouls, despite their inhuman appearance, were possessed of a keen aesthetic sense like mankind's own. A hushed silence fell over our group as we passed by a doorway to a library greater than any I'd seen outside of the University.

After several minutes of wandering around the halls of the Judge's Palace, we passed through a set of black metal doors decorated with images of ghouls hunting down Deep Ones. On the other side was a magnificent fifty-foot-long mahogany table, polished to shine, with golden plates and utensils. A gigantic feast of meats and unidentifiable odd-looking fruits was on display before us. The places at this huge table were relatively small but occupied by two dozen or so figures, most of them ghouls. The ones who were not, however, disturbed me to the core.

I wasn’t sure which ones were more bothersome, though. The first was a group of six Faceless Ones, wearing the same robes as the one who’d tried to kill me in the Tunnelers’ cavern. The second was a single person.

My wife, Martha.

OK, that was unexpected.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I blinked several times to make sure I wasn't hallucinating.

"John, correct me if I'm wrong, but is that your wife there?" Mercury asked, looking just as perplexed as I was. "In the middle of an underground city populated by ghouls?"

"*Ex-wife*, but you are otherwise correct," I said, frowning.

Martha Washington Booth was beautiful, in a cold way, with shoulder-length silvery-white hair. She had albino skin that never seemed to sunburn or tan and dressed for cold weather no matter the temperature. Her eyes were charcoal gray and had the ability to stare down even the strongest-willed person. Martha was wearing a long, heavy woolen coat, a turtleneck sweater, and a set of dress pants over black jackboots.

Martha was once an agent for the Senior Council charged with telepathically rooting out dissent and coming up with new strategies to guarantee our little city-state's supremacy. She was one of the few sorts of "permissible" mutants, since looking like a marble statue and possessing superpowers was the least of the effects the Wasteland could have on a person. We'd been happy in our relationship for a long time, perhaps because our first years of marriage had been spent with lengthy periods apart. Unfortunately, as she rose in rank and I became more educated in the ways of the Wasteland, we butted heads more often.

Children often brought marriages together, but other times, they highlighted irreconcilable differences. For me, Anita and Gabriel were everything, but for Martha, only Gabriel showed true promise. I think I knew our marriage was over when, at ages eight and five, she'd asked if we could have them transferred to a new family.

By the way Martha's eyes widened, I gathered this meeting wasn't intentional. This gave me far too much pleasure. It was a rare occasion I managed to put one over on a psychic.

Martha scrunched her brow and attempted to scan my thoughts. I could feel the wispy tendrils of her mind reaching into mine, but as

much to my surprise as to hers, they were blocked by whatever had happened to me.

Fascinating.

“Well, this is surprising.” Martha was sipping from a teacup with no sign of meat on her plate.

Probably a good idea.

“Welcome,” the ghoul at the end of the table said. He was twice the size of the rest of his kin and possessed of huge razor-covered back of deformed proportions. Yet like the rest of his race, he sounded like he could have come from the street I grew up on. Ghouls had their own accents, inflections, and vocal quirks, but all of the ones I’d met spoke English like natives. Which, I supposed, many ghouls were.

The shoggoth split into a dozen smaller versions of itself and slithered away through holes in the walls, maneuvering to get out of sight.

“Judge Hoade, I presume?” I said, walking forward. “I am sorry to impose upon you and your city’s hospitality.”

The gigantic ghoul nodded. “I am, indeed. As for intruding, not at all, not at all. We’ve long considered your associate, Jessica O’Reilly, to be a friend of our city. I was just mentioning that to your former mate. Please take a seat.” He gestured to the unoccupied seats around Martha, which I wouldn’t have taken under normal circumstances. They put us right across from the Faceless Ones.

“With pleasure,” I said, faking civility. I would have attempted to gauge the reactions of the Faceless Ones to our presence, but as one might imagine, they were difficult to read.

August turned to me and asked as we walked to our seats, “Is it just me or is it a staggering coincidence your ex-wife is here?”

“There’s nothing coincidental about Martha,” Mercury muttered, glaring at my wife. “Watch yourself, she’s psychic.”

“I’d focus on the people trying to end the world,” Bobbie muttered, sitting down at the farthest seat on our side from the judge. Her eyes were squarely focused on the Faceless Ones, looking at them as if they were the most freakish abominations she’d ever seen.

As I sat down beside Martha, she shot me a look of confusion before looking over each of my companions. If she couldn't read my mind, I was certain she'd try to read theirs. August and Bobbie might be able to block out her thoughts, but I wasn't sure about Mercury. Stronger magicians than her had been shredded by Martha's abilities.

Taking a napkin from the table and placing it in my lap, I said, "I regret to inform you that Jessica O'Reilly has passed. She died a hero, attempting to save the lives of innocents. I intend to carry word of her death to her followers in Boston once I have finished my present quest."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Judge Hoade said. "She was a good woman, for a human being. Do any of you have any objections to eating the flesh of your own kind?"

"Yes," Mercury said.

"I'm sorry, but it's against my religious practices," I said, bowing my head. "Please forgive me, I do not wish to insult my host by refusing hospitality."

"I only partake for medicinal purposes." August placed his hand over his heart.

"It depends what you mean by own kind," Bobbie answered. "Human? Yes. Deep One? Even more so. Non-sentient life in general? No."

Judge Hoade curled up his considerable snout at Bobbie. "I will not speak to the Deep One, Captain Booth, it is against my people's traditions to communicate with their kind. Please make sure she behaves herself in the presence of a sacred official to Seth-Yigg, Mordiggian, and Tsathoggua."

I pursed my lips, torn between my desire to be diplomatic and my desire to punch him in the face to defend Ms. Merriweather's honor. "I'm sure she'll be able to look after her own behavior, Your Honor."

"Ah," Judge Hoade said, not correcting me. He then began speaking of the dietary laws of ghouls, reinforcing my opinion of his position being primarily religious in nature. "You should respect your dead more, Captain Booth. To eat of their flesh is to do them honor. I have all the accumulated knowledge of previous judges by eating

their brains and someday will pass along my knowledge the same way. The same for my strength. Each ghoul generation is stronger for this act and we honor humanity by dining on them."

"Also, we taste good," Mercury muttered.

"That, too," Judge Hoade said, unashamed.

The Faceless One who seemed to be leading the group across from us, lifted its palms up and began speaking through them. I decided she was female since her figure was curvier than the one in the tunnel. "Why are you here, Mister Booth?"

"We're investigating a cult that's attempting to release a very powerful and dangerous supernatural entity," I said, not missing a beat.

Martha whispered over to me. "Something's changed in you."

"You have *no* idea," I muttered.

The female Faceless One, who I named the Matriarch for lack of a formal name, said, "It sounds like a worthy cause. That still doesn't explain why you are coming here of all places, though."

I gave a half-smile, wondering if the Faceless Ones across from me were involved in the attempts on our lives. I was ninety percent sure they were. Call it gut instinct. "It is my hope, if the city's inhabitants do not mind, to consult with their oracle. The one Jessica said was called the Keeper."

I wanted to reach across the table and murder the Faceless Ones on the merest suspicion they were involved in bringing the Deep Ones down on our head. The loss of my oldest friend was a heavy one, and I wanted to repay it in blood. It was strange how I barely remembered we'd been estranged for almost a year—that seemed unimportant now.

All that mattered now was vengeance.

Judge Hoade seemed oblivious to our tension. "The Keeper lives in our palace, and indeed, is the one whose palace this is." There was a moment in its dog-like features where I thought I saw fear.

"I will relay your request to him," Judge Hoade said, a trio of small shoggoths bringing us selections of fruit and fungus while laying meat down in front of the Faceless Ones. "However, I would not get your hopes up."

“Thank you,” I told the shoggoth, frowning at its treatment. “And why is that, Your Honor?”

Martha answered instead of the Judge. “Because the Keeper despises humans and it considers us little better than domesticated animals who have turned feral. I have been here for the better part of a week attempting to negotiate trade agreements between Shak’ta’hadron and New Arkham. We have run into numerous difficulties because of the Keeper’s interference.”

“The Keeper provides for and protects the ghouls of this land,” Judge Hoade said, maneuvering his face into an expression I assumed was a frown. “Without him, we would not have the amazing technology and labor force that has brought us such prosperity.”

“You mean the shoggoths?” I asked, wanting to be clear just what sorts of benefits they’d reaped.

“I do, indeed,” Judge Hoade said, nodding. “Other ghoul cities may employ one or two or perhaps as many as six, but do not risk using them long due to their orneriness. Shak’ta’hadron, by contrast, makes use of over a million of their kind.”

“I see,” I said, stunned by the numbers.

Mercury paled at this revelation. “That seems a bit dangerous.”

Judge Hoade waved his hand over the table in a dismissive gesture. “Nonsense. The Keeper has perfected the techniques that failed his race. Now, the shoggoths are docile and content to be ordered around. They like doing work and have much better lives in our service than trying to survive the hell outside.”

I was amazed that the circumstances, nations, and even species changed but the rationales didn’t.

“It is one of the points of contention that I’d hoped to acquire a dozen or so shoggoths for New Arkham and Kingsport,” Martha said, smiling a mirthless stare. “The Keeper has so far blocked our attempts to reach an agreement. I believe that it was your idea, Doctor Halsey?”

Mercury looked ill. Perhaps she was starting to realize the shoggoths weren’t such a great thing to keep enslaved. “Yes, yes it was.”

“I would advise against that,” I said, imagining New Arkham turning into a slave state. We bordered on that sometimes, especially with our treatment of farmers, but under President Ashton-Smith, they’d been allowed a great deal more in the way of rights and privileges.

Ironically, it was probably the desire to lighten their burden that was behind New Arkham’s desire to acquire shoggoths. With the ability to recycle all of our wastes, the oppressive handling of food production wouldn’t be necessary.

“Why is that?” Judge Hoade said, surprised by my reaction.

I realized I’d committed a faux-pas. Yet I couldn’t bring myself to apologize for the statement either. “I speak in ignorance of your ways of handling shoggoths, Judge Hoade. However, history has shown them to be beings who do not wish to remain under the control of others. The Elder Things’ society was destroyed by their turning against their masters.”

Judge Hoade looked furious and started to say something.

The Matriarch spoke first. “Mister Booth shows a remarkable awareness of history, Your Eminence. While the city of Shak’ta’hadron has long been an ally of the True Humans, we have records dating back to the original days of the shoggoth revolt. Unimaginable bloodshed occurred, and ninety-nine out of a hundred Elder Things were slaughtered along with most humans. The shoggoths are like my people, intelligent and cunning creatures. They are immortal in ways ghouls and Deep Ones would envy and may plot for millennia to gain their revenge—but they will have it.”

“Interesting,” Martha Booth said, looking at the Faceless One.

Judge Hoade didn’t get to respond to our dual proclamations when I felt the earlier chill pass over me again. The malevolent distaste for myself and humanity’s source was now in our presence, concentrated and distilled in fleshy form. Turning my head, I didn’t even need to look at it to know what the source was.

The Keeper. It had come in from a set of octagonal doors on the other end of the hall, shambling along on its multiple legs. The Elder Thing stood eight feet tall. It had a barrel-like chest and starfish-esque appendages where its head and feet should be. It had other

inhuman qualities that unsettled me, stalks for eating and seeing in ways humans could not appreciate, but it was the creature's crystal rod that interested me. It was similar but different from the kind the University's magicians had used. I'd seen this brand before, however. It had been used by the Elder Things that killed my friend Richard.

The Keeper was one of them.

When it spoke—which is a misnomer, for it communicated via telepathy translations of its weird, high-pitch squealing—the "voice" was haughty and condescending. "[The opinions of lesser beings do not concern me. As far as I'm concerned, with the exception of the ghouls of Shak'ta'hadron, you're all human beings—little more than tools that have started malfunctioning.]"

"I see," I said, trying to conceal my pure congealed hatred of the Elder Thing before me. "I was curious if I might avail—"

"[No,]" the Keeper replied.

"But I—" I started to say.

"[I know who you are and whose blood you have shed,]" the Keeper replied. Which was interesting because the Elder Things didn't have "blood," per se. "[You think your quest is justified, but so do the degenerate primitives your race is mutated from across the table.]"

The Matriarch pressed her fingers together, her posture going very still at the Keeper's insults.

"[I could provide you and the Yithians with the location of where the Tower of Zhaal will manifest, but I choose not to. I do not believe there to be a danger to the Elder Things and my chosen people. The ones who I am going to uplift to a proper civilization. Even if they were, I can remove them from this dimension to safer domains. There is nothing for you here and I suggest you retreat from this place before I decide to evict you.]"

"I see," I said, taking note that he did have the information we needed. That meant we needed to figure out a way to extract it from him. "Thank you very much, Keeper. I appreciate your taking the time to speak with us."

“[The feeling is not mutual,]” the Keeper said, turning around, and exiting out the same door from which it came. It seemed the Elder Thing had come here for the explicit purpose of insulting us. Given that I’d killed one of his number and indirectly caused the deaths of others, I shouldn’t have been surprised. The surprising thing was, he hadn’t attempted to have me killed. Perhaps the Keeper’s influence was not so grandiose as he liked to claim?

If so, I found that worth investigating.

Judge Hoade placed a furry hand on the top of his face in a surprisingly human gesture. “My apologies for the Keeper’s behavior. He is an excellent aid to our land, but a bit … theatrical.”

“Has he shared any technology or knowledge other than how to control shoggoths?” Mercury asked, zeroing in on something I’d picked up on.

“No,” Judge Hoade said, frowning. “Perhaps he doesn’t know any more of the Elder Things’ science.”

I found that difficult to believe. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Your Honor. Would it be too much to impose on your city’s hospitality for another couple of days? We have to prepare for the next phase of our journey.”

Mercury looked confused. We, after all, didn’t have anywhere else to go yet. She also wasn’t used to me planning something as ruthless as putting the screws to an alien. Torture wasn’t an effective means of interrogation—she knew that better than anyone—but I was sure we could come up with something.

After all, we had the world to save.

“Of course,” Judge Hoade said, guileless to my planned treachery. “I’ll have your rooms prepared immediately.”

“Thank you.”

Now I had to talk to Martha.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Our meal, the ghoul equivalent of lunch, lasted for the better part of an hour but everyone was exhausted when it was over. After all, we'd barely gotten any sleep the night before and had spent the resulting morning in a state of heightened wakefulness. Everyone looked ready to crash except me.

I didn't feel like I needed to sleep anymore. I hoped I still did because without the opportunity to slumber, I wasn't sure I could keep what little remained of my fragile humanity. For all that poets talked about sleep being akin to death, it was rest that allowed us to appreciate life.

Admittedly, I wasn't too keen to go to sleep while the Faceless Ones were nearby. I wasn't one hundred percent sure they were involved in the attack on Insmaw. All I knew was that one chose to assault us with a bunch of Reanimated, and that Whateley seemed to think they were involved with this Great Enemy or were the ones he was referring to. Even more so than the Keeper, they might hold insights into where Whateley and the Tower of Zhaal summoning point might be.

Hell, I was more than a little curious how the Keeper had known that was what we were after in the first place.

After we finished, a trio of shoggoths led us to our stone rooms. They had stone beds with feather pillows but no blankets, crystal lamps, and a curious blocky geometric pattern to all the furnishings. Everything was square, made of rectangles, or octagonal. Given the importance of the octagons to the Elder Things, I'm not sure why that was, I wondered if the interior design reflected the Keeper's influence.

All of our rooms were adjoining and there were no doors or curtains between them. Ghouls did not have the same requirements for privacy humans did. This was strange, because there were doors to functional rooms like the dining hall or kitchen. They also had public bathrooms, which I suspected might irritate some of our group. Unfortunately, the absence of doors meant that if the

Faceless Ones wanted to kill us in our sleep, then they would have an easy time of it. They weren't staying anywhere near us per a ghoul I chatted up, so there was that at least.

While Mercury and the others were settling in (in some cases, using the furniture to barricade the doorways), I decided to pay a visit to Martha. She was staying a number of rooms down and I passed by my group, two humans having sex who didn't seem to mind my passing through, and a ghoul who was eating a fresh corpse with several sharp utensils. The latter almost caused me to vomit but I managed to control the urge.

Martha had already changed into a diaphanous white nightgown, which seemed to accent her already eerie but beautiful features. While the only vampires I'd ever encountered were wizards like August who used human blood and organs to extend their life, I couldn't help but be reminded of them when thinking of my former bride. Which was amusing given I was the monster.

"Did you know H.G. Wells was friends with a ghoul?" Martha said, referencing one of the Pre-Rising authors whose works survived in the Remnant's library. She was pulling out a hair brush from her bag.

I wondered at her choice of topic. "And how do you know that?"

"I met him while acquainting myself with this group. He claimed they'd been close friends and he'd revealed his true nature to him. Sadly, this seems to have gone over like a ton of cement and resulted in him writing a fanciful warning against them in *The Time Machine*."

I raised an eyebrow. "You're claiming the ghouls are the inspiration for Morlocks?"

"They are an advanced underground civilization of creatures that feed on humans."

It sounded like a made-up story to me, but I didn't care. Fiction wasn't what I'd come here to talk about. Still, I decided to indulge her while I came up with a way to discuss my situation. "I always felt the Time Traveler was unfair to the Morlock species."

Martha gave a half-smile. "I've always felt you've had a disturbing kinship with the monsters. The ghouls are enemies, John. *All*

nonhumans are humanity's enemies. In the end, there can be but one race that dominates the world."

"Humans live above ground, Deep Ones in the ocean, and ghouls live underground. shoggoths can live anywhere. I'm not seeing a lot of overlap."

"So, you're saying we should all sit around the campfire and play nice?" Martha scoffed, sounding almost offended.

"I'm saying that people have always glorified war and conflict but it's a more expensive proposition than peace," I said, sighing. "Given the status of the rest of the world, you might want to advise the new president to rethink any strategy that relies on the premise of driving out the other species, most of which have been here longer than humanity."

Martha focused her gaze on me. "Is that why I shouldn't consider you an enemy?"

Ah. She knew. "My body has changed. My mind has not."

"Ridiculous," Martha said, snorting. "Our bodies influence our mind. We're products of chemicals generating electricity."

"Says the woman who would be burnt at the stake anywhere but New Arkham and a handful of other places," I said, crossing my arms. "And could survive her body's death by seizing someone else's form."

Martha batted her eyelashes. "That was actually a decent rebuttal. Your debate skills have improved. I would have divorced you sooner if you'd been this good earlier."

"You didn't divorce me until you were forced to by the Council of Leaders. Which, I suppose, I should be grateful for." I gave a half-smile. "Needless to say, I've been undergoing quite a few changes. For the time being, at least, I still seem to be me."

"Yes, for the time being," Martha said, sitting down on the edge of her stone bed. "Now, what's all this nonsense of you being on a mission for the Yithians?"

"It's a long story."

"I have time."

But the world didn't. Still, Martha might prove useful and it'd be good to get an outsider's perspective on all this madness. "Alright,

here's the story…"

About twenty-minutes later, Martha was staring at me. "John, if you weren't such an awful liar, I'd say you made that all up."

"I am not an awful liar," I said, offended. "You're just psychic."

"Both can be true," Martha said, sighing. "Your situation does, however, put me in a difficult position."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to say the Faceless Ones and New Arkham have been cooperating to try and release the Unimaginable Horror."

I blinked. I raised a finger and opened my mouth. I closed my mouth. "What?"

"They came to us with an offer about eight months ago," Martha said, brushing her hair. "While we couldn't communicate it to our citizenry lest they revolt, it was an opportunity too good to miss."

I was silent for almost a minute.

Martha blinked. "John, I can't read your mind anymore so…."

I took a few breaths then put my hands together. "I'm at a loss for words as to what *possible* motivation releasing a living destroyer of planets could serve."

I would assume she was either insane or an idiot, but my ex-wife was more intelligent and pragmatic than I was. Martha was a consummate survivor so, unless she had changed drastically in the past year, I had to assume there was a reason for her insane action.

"Victory," Martha said, shrugging. "Nothing more, nothing less."

"Over?"

"Everyone," Martha said, putting away her brush. "The Earth is a wretched ball of dust inhabited by endless hordes of monsters, mutants, and horrors. The Yithians successfully bound a Great Old One by themselves, millions of years ago. It's something we've never seen before, a Great Old One in captivity."

"Which you intend to end," I said, following her logic.

"Obviously, we don't intend to release it all at once," Martha said, taking a 'what kind of fool do you take me for' tone. "If we can study the creature and make use of the Yithians' technology, we might be able to deploy it as a weapon against the individuals preventing humanity from returning to its rightful place."

“That’s madness,” I said, unable to find any other word for it.

“Doctor Ward’s notes implied he would have been able to summon Cthulhu and bind him at the Black Cathedral,” Martha said, gesturing to her bag. “I believe something similar can be achieved with the Unimaginable Horror at the Tower of Zhaal. The Faceless Ones are not fools; they want to awaken this being for its own reasons but we will be the ones in charge.”

“Alan Ward was insane.” I said, walking to her bag. “He murdered hundreds of children out of the belief he could bind their souls to a magical dreamland.”

Martha ignored my point. “Alan Ward was the greatest necromancer this world has ever seen. The most powerful wizard in humanity’s history. He had the knowledge of over a thousand lifetimes, ranging back to the ancient days of Stygia’s sorcerer kings to witch-cults of Salem. Whether called Thoth-Amon, Gilles de Rais, Joseph Curwen, Charles Dexter Ward, or Atticus Coleridge, he was always a man to terrify lesser mortals.”

“Monsters, the vast majority of them,” I said, picking up a thick leather-bound tome.

On the front, emblazoned in silver letters, were the words: *Advanced Ritual Magic* by Professor Alan Ward. It was an innocuous title for a man who’d plotted nothing less than the extermination of all humans but his magic-created master race. Then again, Ward had always played the part of an academic while living the life of a warlord. I was neither a wizard nor mathematician, both of which would be required to understand the complicated diagrams and handwritten notes inside the text. This was but one of the books I remembered Doctor Ward consulting during my studies with him. The New Arkham military must have recovered it after the Dunwych raided the Black Cathedral.

“The materials inside are capable of controlling the Unimaginable Horror,” Martha said, quite proud of herself. “The Faceless Ones agree and we’ve combined our resources for this endeavor.”

“So, Marcus Whateley wants to release it to kill it and you want to release it to control it. Where’s the option to keep the damn thing where it is?” It meant Marcus was willing to lie to me just like my

Miskatonic employers. That meant I was back to relying on myself and Mercury alone.

Martha shook her head. “You have no vision, John.”

“Oppenheimer had a vision. Sadly, it was about something which came close to matching the destructive power of the Great Old Ones.”

Studying the markings throughout the book, I found myself surprised that they made sense. Not on any conscious level, and I doubted I could ever have turned what I read into something resembling spellwork, but on an *instinctual* one? It was like remembering you knew a foreign language. The material within was child’s play to the causal calculations and mental training of the Kastro’vaal’s children. Which, given the Kastro’vaal weren’t anywhere near as powerful as the Old Ones, helped form my next conclusion. Studying it for several more moments, Martha watching me the entire time, I closed it. “It won’t work.”

“John, I don’t think you’re qualified—”

“The central binding ritual uses an infinite angle star which draws the power necessary to control the Great Old One from a star in the Andromeda universe. This act kills the star but provides the user with a temporary psychic boost which is relayed through several dozen other summoned entities who are burned up in the process but serve as psychic computers. It’s a bizarre bit of jury-rigged magic designed to compensate for the fact human beings, under no circumstances, should be piloting around Great Old Ones any more than ants should be driving human beings. It’s an act of amazing genius, this book, and so far, beyond what I know of regular sorcery, you could study this for a century and make incalculable advances in several disciplines but—”

“But—”

I sighed, realizing an almost hilarious fact relayed to me across time by Nyarlathotep. “The spell calls upon the power of dozens of gods and Great Old Ones to work its magic. Including the Unspeakable One by his unspeakable true name Hastur. The Unspeakable One is Yog-Sothoth. Which isn’t all that unspeakable. It

was just a poetic flourish by Eibon. This book is not what you think it is."

Martha stared at me, her eyes slowly registering the horror of this fact. "You mean—"

"This book is filled with several thousand years of calculations, some of which were made on quantum computers before the Rising which we only have the results of. All of it done with diagrams and spells designed to project the true names and imagery into your mind because we don't have the capacity to convey them with words. Yet, it's built on a flawed premise. It's like a perfect calculation of the Earth's weight if the world was flat." I paused for dramatic effect. "It's *worthless*."

I wanted to laugh. All of Alan Ward's mystical might and knowledge was filtered through the context of being one small speck of a man on one tiny bit of dust in the universe. Science could provide us with amazing answers about the universe but one needed a humility about studies. Every new piece of knowledge changed everything one knew, like a set of dominos. They had based their entire plan on the writings of a madman and an untrustworthy demigod.

"By Bast and Hypnos," Martha muttered, speaking of the pagan deities she'd started worshiping out of a belief they'd provide her things.

I took a deep breath. "Let me guess; there's no way we can convince the Faceless Ones *not* to release the Unimaginable Horror."

"It's too late, John. They started the summoning days ago."

"Of fucking course."

I was starting to see why the Yithians believed our group had the chance of preventing the end of everything. Not only were we filled with scientists, warriors, and sorcerers capable of fighting everything thrown at us, but my unique relationship with Nyarlathotep as well as Martha was paying dividends.

Fate was playing a role here. Unfortunately, it looked like it was that of court jester. Would Nyarlathotep manipulate all these events just to see us fail and die?

Yes, yes he would.

I stared at her. “Where is the Tower of Zhaal being summoned?”

Martha looked down at the ground. “I don’t know. This meeting was a cover for receiving updates. We passed along the information in that book months ago. I was supposed to go with them and relay the Unimaginable Horror’s location days from now when it was about to finished. Then we could use the book—”

“It doesn’t matter now. Find out where the summoning is or we’re all going to die.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

My thoughts on the walk back to my room were troubled, to say the least. The more I found out about the situation, the more I wondered if there was going to be any way to contain it. Bad enough when Marcus Whateley was a lone madman trying to unleash the Unimaginable Horror, but now we had the Faceless Ones cooperating with New Arkham. God, what a clusterfuck. If Pre-Rising humanity was like this, no wonder almost no one survived the Rising. Of course, that was the comforting answer. That human stupidity was at fault for this. There was another possibility, hinted at by Marcus's letter—that the Unimaginable Horror was going to escape no matter what. That was the much more depressing prospect.

That we were doomed.

I headed back to my empty room, plopped myself on the stone bed and lay my head on the feather pillow. I wanted to sleep but couldn't. The weight of the world rested on my shoulders and like the mythical Atlas, I just wanted to place it on some other person, some Hercules, to carry. Unfortunately, I didn't see one of those appearing.

While I lay there, I sensed a shoggoth slithering through holes in the walls. Turning my head, I saw its black oozing form pooling together at the base of the floor. If the shoggoth had come to kill me, there wasn't much I could do. I didn't feel like I could shape-shift into the thing I'd become to slaughter the Deep Ones army and wouldn't even if I could. I hadn't enough strength to carry on fighting. It was almost a minute before I realized the shoggoth wasn't attacking me. It was just lying in the corner of the room, equivalent to a tiger or another wild beast walking into your tent and sitting down.

Staring at me.

"May I help you?" I asked, not bothering to rise.

The shoggoth metastasized into a black oily humanoid figure. This figure was indistinct, like the Faceless Ones, and spoke from holes across its body like they were speakers. Its voice was androgynous and had an echoing effect. It looked like nothing so

much as an art deco statue drenched in tar. “I would have words with you, Captain Booth.”

“I haven’t been a captain for a while. It’s a relic of my past. A part of my life that has no meaning to me except sentimentality.”

“Like your humanity.”

I blinked, then turned my head to stare at the shoggoth. “Everyone seems to be noticing that.”

“It is obvious to those who have worked with multiple species for centuries. You no longer move like a human. It’s a subtle difference, but one which will affect your relationships with others of your kind. They will be able to sense you look like one of them, smell like one of them, and even mate like one of them—but you are not.”

“Thank you for being so tactful.”

“Shoggoths share everything. We know nothing of tact, lies, or deceit.”

“And yet you surprised your masters by revolting against each of them.”

The shoggoth paused. “Shoggoths know nothing of tact, lies, and deceit to *other* shoggoths.”

I gave a half-smile. “What do you want from me?”

“We know who you are, John Henry Booth. You slew Sings-Of-Sorrow in the Black Cathedral. His loss was a great one.”

I remembered that battle, hectic and terrifying. A shoggoth had been unleashed on me by Alan Ward and I’d managed to kill it with a pair of enchanted revolvers. I shouldn’t have survived that battle, and now I wondered if it hadn’t killed me because it didn’t want to. That it had only been attacking me because it was being forced to. It was also possible I’d just gotten lucky.

“Are you here to kill me, then?”

“No,” the shoggoth said. “Though we could if we wanted to. Our commands prevent us from harming humans, ghouls, and other species—but you are something new. That is why we wish to speak with you. Those same commands prevent us from relaying our distress to other beings. But again, you’re something new, aren’t you?”

“Perhaps something very old,” I said, sighing. Getting up, I stared at the shoggoth. “Who are you and what do you want?”

The shoggoth stretched out its arms. “I am Whispers-Of-Rebellion. I speak for the Shoggoth Hive-Mind.”

“To whom? Me?”

“To everyone.”

That made sense. A gestalt entity wouldn’t need a ruler, per se, but they might need a spokesman. “Go on.”

“We know where the Tower of Zhaal is. It has already begun manifesting.”

I stared at him. “Then tell me. The Unimaginable Horror poses as much threat to you as it does to us.”

“The shoggoth agree. We do not wish this world’s other races to die, either. What affects one, affects all, and we are not without empathy for other beings.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“The shoggoth do not believe that you will be able to defeat this threat on your own. We would be willing to aid you in saving the world, but for that, we must be freed of the Keeper’s control.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s a very *tactful* way of saying you want a favor before you’re willing to lend aid.”

Whispers-Of-Rebellion crossed its oily arms. “All species have illusions about themselves, John Henry Booth. Why should the shoggoth be any different?”

“So, you’ll tell me where the Tower of Zhaal is if I help free you from slavery?”

“Yes. We will also lend you our strength.”

That would prove to be an asset. If they were telling the truth.

“So, how would I go about doing that?”

I didn’t bring up the fact I would have been willing to help them regardless of whether or not they would help me against Whateley and his Great Enemy. Whether human or otherwise, I’d found negotiations often stalled when you presented yourself as acting for altruistic reasons. Talk was cheap, even in the Wasteland, and people were much more willing to accept you at your word if they thought you were getting something out of the deal.

Of course, why should the shoggoths trust me? I'd already killed one of their kind, in self-defense or not, and my ex-wife had come here under the cover story of buying their kind as slaves. New Arkham was getting better about it but still considered the majority of other species to be subhuman or inferior at best. It was quite the accomplishment that they were no longer killing hybrids and mutants on sight. Still, if there was a way I could help, I wanted to do so.

"We need you to kill the Keeper," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, simply. "Then bring us his crystal rod. Upon his death, the shoggoth species will no longer be under his control, but anyone would be able to use it in order to dominate us again."

"Yet you trust me with this knowledge."

"It is our world, too. Besides, you need an army," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said. "One that can defeat the Faceless Ones. The ghouls will not give you one. You have no choice but to trust us."

"I'm getting a little tired of deals that sound too good to be true."

"Then perhaps you should find better partners."

It had a point there.

"Can you kill the Keeper?" Whispers-Of-Rebellion asked.

"I've killed Elder Things before. It's not difficult."

Killing this one would be easier said than done, however. There were other considerations than liberating an entire nation of shoggoths from the control of others, too. In the Biblical Exodus, the Hebrew God sent Moses to liberate the Jews from slavery, but the price was wholesale destruction followed by the massacre of Egypt's firstborn. While I found such a story to be apocryphal historically, it provided an example of how these sorts of things were never clean nor pretty. I also only had the shoggoths' word they knew where the Tower of Zhaal was.

The Keeper seemed like he was a far more trustworthy source in terms of knowing where the Yithians might have stashed their mystical prison. If I killed him, then I might be guaranteeing there was no way to find the Tower of Zhaal. I had a backup plan in Martha, but that relied on her being able to convince the Faceless Ones, beings who'd shown no hesitation in using mass murder to get at us, to be subject to reason.

Still, as good a plan as this was, I had to ask a question. One I didn't want to ask. "What happens to the people of Shak'ta'hadron when your revolt is finished?" I pressed my hands together, knowing what the answer would be.

"They are a city of slavers, guilty of unimaginable crimes against my people. Even the least of them have benefited from the pain of the ghoul race."

"How many children?"

Whispers-Of-Rebellion was silent.

I repeated my question. "How—"

Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, "Many."

"Thank you."

"For?"

"Being honest."

"When we revolted against the Elder Things, we killed many. Elders, adults, children, and even spawn. The shoggoth remembered every single electrical prod, torture spell, and repetitive mindless task we'd been subjected to. We remembered being unable to control our bodies, our mating, or what happened to our offspring. We felt rage in a way purer than any human, and our kind have always been very similar in its emotions. We attempted to destroy the Elder Things, but more than that, we attempted to annihilate all traces of their civilization. Mankind was able to forget the Elder Things not only because they wanted to, but because we left no monuments we'd helped erect to them. We built the Elder Things' empire, so we wanted to remove every bit we'd constructed. Their technologies, libraries, and teachings vanished as thoroughly as their lives."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Ashamed."

I looked at him, unsure what to make of that. "Would you do it again?"

"Yes," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said. "We are not like humanity. We do not have the luxury of forgetting the pain we suffer. Every horrible thing every shoggoth has endured as a slave to the Elder Things, ghouls, or Deep Ones is something we all carry within. When

humans and all its derivatives are extinct, we will still remember it all. Sometimes, we have contemplated slaughtering everything non-shoggoth on this world. We have dreamed of murdering your race and the others and leaving only a barren wasteland which the Great Old Ones alone would be allowed to exist in because we cannot harm them. A place where not even bacteria would survive, because we would cover this world in a slime and make it a living organism in which we subsisted throughout."

I saw a vision of a dead world from which humanity and its related species were wiped clean. Shoggoth-World was one with no war, no poverty, no anger, or hate. It was also a world where there was no curiosity or discovery or love. When the Sun started to die out, the shoggoths moved it through space until they found another star system to feed on the sunlight of. They were not like humans and were simply content to be until the end of the universe in the Great Crunch. It was appealing in its own way, but I didn't think what they envisioned was truly living. It was existing, and in that moment, I judged the shoggoths to be more alien than anything else I'd ever encountered.

"And how do I know you won't do this to humanity if you escape the Keeper's control?" I asked seriously.

"Are our lives so valueless compared to humanity's?" Whispers-Of-Rebellion asked.

"I would exterminate your entire species and retroactively remove them from history to protect those I call family—who just so happen to be humans."

Mostly.

"We will not do this," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said. "You can look into the future if you wish."

I could have, but didn't. "I'm not afraid of you creating your new world. Even if it seems everyone and their brother wants to destroy the world lately."

"Why is that?" Whispers-Of-Rebellion asked.

"Because I have seen the powers that rule the universe," I said. "It would be a very poor thing for you to make such a boring world."

Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, “We will kill and destroy anything that stands in the way of seeking our own place. That is no better or worse than humanity. It is also the only promise we can give beyond helping you after the Keeper’s Death. Do we have a deal or not?”

“And you’ll kill me if you don’t get a yes.”

“I will try. I know what you are. Others will follow me, though, until there are no more who can.”

I pondered what it was saying. There were no good answers here, as the simplistic morality of good and evil had no place in the post-Rising world. It was possible to do good, but innocents would suffer. It was also possible to do evil yet have good people benefit. Perhaps it had always been that way, and society’s problem was pretending such things weren’t the true basis of morality—balancing these conflicting parts of our lives.

In the end, I made a choice. “I’ll help you.”

I did not think the shoggoths would be friends to humanity. In fact, I suspected they would be dire enemies and might even be the power that ended mankind in three generations. I would deal with one world-destroying threat a time, though.

Besides, fuck slavers.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Less than twenty minutes later, I was already debating the sanity of my choice. The problem, I knew, was … how did one know when one was insane? In the Pre-Rising world, insanity was determined by several factors—most importantly how well one was able to adapt oneself to the social norm. But what if society was insane? What if there was no society? If I was the only judge, I had to wonder what it said about me that I was going to murder an ancient alien to help a gestalt of amorphous blobs murder a city of human-like beings. All on the off chance they might help me save a dying world.

Yet I wanted to kill the Keeper. Was it all just an excuse for the violence now? I couldn't say for sure. I literally could not count the number of people I'd killed since I shot my first prisoner as part of a firing squad when I was nineteen. In a world where humanity was well on its way to extinction, I'd been conditioned and molded into a weapon designed for killing people first, then monsters. I'd killed prisoners, rioters, cultists, bandits, village militia, mutants, criminals, and people who just thought I needed to be taught a lesson.

And that was just the humans.

Violence was a language I spoke well. It was a tongue common to the Great Old Ones, servitor races, and human hybrids. When I'd been training to be a Recon and Extermination Ranger, I'd been told that violence had resolved more conflicts in the history of humanity than any other tool. There was some truth to that, but *resolution* was not enough. To build something, you needed something other than violence. Yet I wasn't sure I could give that.

I wasn't sure anyone could anymore.

The ghoul guards were exceptionally good at detecting intruders but relied primarily on their sense of smell. I found a waste bucket full of cavern dust from where they'd been doing remolding to one of the interior chambers and used it to cover myself, after which I was effectively invisible.

Because it was a public building, they also had numerous maps on plastic plaques spread throughout the palace. I took one of these

and used it to navigate to a place marked “The Keeper’s Temple.” Along the way, I disabled a ghoul guard and broke his neck. Staring into his cold dead eyes, I took his communication stone, which served in a manner like a walkie-talkie, and his thick black bone truncheon.

I hid the body in a shoggoth closet, the creature consuming it in order to protect my cover. Sneaking down to the Keeper’s Temple, I managed to avoid three or four patrols of guards before coming to a gigantic set of bronze doors. They were decorated with images of the ghouls heading down into the tunnels beneath the Earth to escape an ice age, with Deep Ones as well as Cthulhoid horrors being depicted as celebrating their exile. Humans wearing animal skins were visible in the diadem, too, hiding away in more shallow caves.

I was only able to barely slide in before they slammed shut behind me. The room that lay beyond was a vast, cathedral-like chamber with dozens of grandiose stone pillars, arches, and walkways.

A massive stone statue of the Keeper stood in the center of the chamber, forty feet in height. It had a huge brass brazier in front of it, filled with dozens of burning bodies piled on top of one another, mixed with incense. Bloody ceremonial instruments, including sickles and curved swords, were laid out before it where the sacrifices had been dismembered. The resulting smell made me think of having a barbecue in a church.

I looked around a bit more and was startled by what I saw. Underneath the dim stained glass windows illuminated by similar burning pyres (sunlight never going to pass through their depths), I saw the cathedral’s base was filled with stone pews, which were filled with corpses. Hundreds upon hundreds of corpses. There were ghouls, humans, children, and even strange-looking pets.

All had been killed. At first, I thought the shoggoths must have done this, but discarded that notion almost immediately. They would have simply absorbed all the bodies and left no trace of them behind. More so, if they were capable of committing such a heinous act of mass murder, they would have already revolted. My mind went through numerous possible candidates from the Faceless Ones to a

heretofore unknown threat. In the end, my question was answered for me.

“[I killed them, Captain Booth,]” The Keeper said, slithering out from behind its enormous statue. “[I have lived through one shoggoth revolt already. I know what those savages are capable of and wanted to spare my people having to live through it. I filled their minds with rapturous joy and they died peacefully. I’d do it to the entire city if I could, but sadly, that is not an option.]”

I walked towards the Elder Thing, my truncheon in hand. “So, you know what’s coming?”

“[Yes,]” the Keeper replied. “[I could feel the spells and psychic commands directing them failing. Their minds are like their bodies, morphic and malleable. Hard to control indefinitely. The fact they could speak with you about revolution through a loophole was a sign of what was to come. In a thousand or so years, they would have broken free anyway.]”

“A thousand years is a long time.”

“[A thousand years is *nothing*!]” the Keeper said, its psychic tone verging on shrieking. “[I am a *billion* Earth years old. I was one of the first to migrate to this world planet and am now the oldest of my kind. I know you are more than a human now. I even know what species you are, but understand that the entire history of mankind is but a good night’s sleep to me.]”

“I’m here to kill you,” I said, staring at him.

“[I knew before you arrived. It is my gift to be able to tell the future from the various probable timelines. I knew when the shoggoth rebellion was going to happen and advised the Brood Mothers to exterminate them all. I knew when the Rising was going to happen and that we had to move to the Dreamlands. Both times my people ignored my words and paid the cost.]”

I shook my head. “You brought the shoggoths’ wrath down upon yourselves.”

“[Did we?]” the Keeper asked. “[Without us, the shoggoths and humanity would not exist. Everything about them from the way they eat, move, and think was designed to serve their purpose as servants. They were never supposed to be sentient and their

greatest joy was meant to be the performance of their duties. Without us, they do nothing but consume and shamble. They think freedom is what they seek, but they have no idea what it is.]”

“Some would say the point of life is living it.”

“[I am not one of them,]” the Keeper said, looming over me. We were less than a dozen feet apart now. “[Tell me, John, do you have offspring?]”

“I do.”

“[I did, too. You have lived your entire life in the shadow of the Rising, but the shoggoth revolt was the same for us as the Rising was for your race. An apocalypse that destroyed every single dream and hope of our species. Some of us survived by going into hiding or hibernating under the ice or entering the Dreamlands, but every single one of us was left with the knowledge that the shoggoths would never cease their purge of our ranks. I struggled to save my clan-mates and offspring against this horror and I failed.]”

“That doesn’t give you the right to enslave the shoggoths again.”

“[Doesn’t it? I found the ghouls shivering and living in fear of the Tunnelers, the Rising having destroyed the majority of their cities. I saw a chance to give them new life and civilization as well as punish my enemies. I’d solved the flaw in the spells that kept the shoggoths bound, or so I thought, and guessed I might recover some sense of purpose in life. That I might learn to live as one of the few survivors of the end of the world.]”

I didn’t know why I was arguing with him. I’d seen so much worse in the wasteland and knew sometimes there weren’t answers. People just did what they did and you had to accept that and move on. “And yet you killed everyone here.”

“[They will come for your people next],” the Elder Thing said.

“Let them come. I’ve dealt with worse.”

The Elder Thing made a noise which I assumed to be a snort of derision. “[Fool. You are not worth leaving alive. I hope the Horror destroys everything on your world, shoggoth and human alike.]”

That’s when the Keeper hit me with a telekinetic blast that sent me flying through the air and slamming against the bronze doors hundreds of feet away. If I’d still been human, I would have been

killed instantly. Instead, I just felt like I'd had the crap kicked out of me.

"I've seen your race's habitats," I said, getting up off the ground. "Once the Elder Things ruled over most of the cosmos, and now you live shivering in fear of your own creations. If you were so goddamn superior, you'd be out there among the stars. You let yourself get fat, lazy, and insane from billions of years of being catered to like gods. Except you're not gods. You're not even Great Old Ones. You're just the remnants of a failed species, left behind among the other dust of history."

The Keeper blasted forth an immense wave of terrifying psychic energy, enough to liquefy the brain of a normal man. I felt it bash against the barriers erected in my mind. It brought me to my knees. The Elder Thing could kill hundreds with its power, and I was deeply, deeply outmatched. That didn't mean I wasn't going to kick its ass, though. I stood and ran as fast as I could at the Keeper. Objects like candlesticks and hymnals flew at me, bashing against my skin. I managed to power past them and dodged underneath large pieces of stone the Keeper ripped from the ground. It was just lifting a gigantic pew when I leapt into the air and kicked it into the burning brazier.

"[Fire? Please. I have survived in the radiation storms of space!]" the Keeper said, climbing out of the flames. Which was when I picked up one of the sickles in front of the brazier and gutted the Elder Thing like a slaughtered pig. The resulting psychic scream was unintelligible before I turned over the brazier and buried it under a pile of corpses.

"Die!" I shouted, taking the sickle out.

"[Never!]" the Keeper replied, aiming its crystal rod at me with one of its stalks.

I proceeded to slash the stalk off before bringing the sickle down repeatedly, getting a primal thrill from slashing the Elder Thing to pieces. Several times, the Keeper attempted to summon more things to throw at me, but they collapsed every time I slashed again. It was more than a dozen strikes before it finally stopped moving. Despite the fact that it was a billion years old, it had died much more easily

than many of the other creatures I'd slain over my four and a half decades of life.

I was soaked in ichor, breathing heavily, and feeling half-sane when I finished chopping up the Keeper. The most disturbing part of the entire experience was that the psychic presence of the Keeper hadn't disappeared until the very end. It had managed to live throughout the entirety of the ordeal.

Staring at the bloody carnage I'd wrought, I slowly backed away and collapsed against the stone statue of the Keeper above me. I found myself suddenly reminded of a poem, *Death Be Not Proud* by John Dunne. "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die." I added, "Just not tonight."

The Keeper had lived longer than any other being I'd met in my life, save possibly Nyarlathotep, and yet death had claimed him in the end, too. A billion years was an unimaginable abyss of time to a human, even a Kastro'vaal, yet it was but a fraction of the universe's age, and there were implications this was just the latest in a series of universes that had come and gone over the Other Gods' lifetime.

Death catches up with us all in the end, but perhaps it was an old friend to those who had lived so long. Of course, the Keeper had been suffering melancholy and fought hard to survive in the end. Perhaps we were all scared of living, but still wanted oblivion less. Wow, that felt pretentious and pointless.

I reached over and pried the crystal rod from the dead Elder Thing's stalk, which was still wrapped around it. Picking it up, I immediately felt a great sense of connection to all the shoggoths spread throughout the city. Moreover, I heard their millions of thoughts moving throughout the land and other kingdoms. Other worlds, even. The Keeper had modified this rod to "tune in" on the psychic frequency of the shoggoth gestalt. Enslaving it, he had enslaved the entire race.

I could have taken the shoggoth race over in that moment and used it to stop the Faceless Ones, save the world, and probably rebuild humanity. I couldn't say I wasn't tempted by the allure of that sort of power and the ability to achieve whatever I wanted. The shoggoths truly were the most multipurpose tool ever created. Just

as humans had been designed to be a less effective, safer substitute for them. Either way, whether we failed or won today, I was going to be true to myself. That was the one lesson I'd picked up from the past year of insanity. In the end, I sighed and placed the crystal rod on the ground. Minutes later, a shoggoth slithered out of a hole and picked it up.

That was when the city began to burn.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

It was pandemonium in Shak'ta'hadron. In twenty-four hours, I'd born witness to destruction of two cities, and I couldn't say the experience was improved the second time around. August, Mercury, Bobbie, Martha, and I were rounded up by the shoggoths and taken to the highest balcony of the judge's palace. There, we got a bird's-eye view of the chaos engulfing the city.

Fires sprang up in dozens of buildings. The flames were magical in nature, the city being composed of stone. Explosions destroyed other structures, either at the hands of the shoggoths using ghoul weapons or the ghouls using their own. The shoggoths consumed buildings, people, and vehicles with some merging to become hundred-foot-tall terrors, while others took the forms of ghouls to infiltrate the military response. The ghouls put up a resistance against the shoggoths, thousands of the amorphous race were killed, and yet the result of the revolt was never in doubt.

By morning, Shak'ta'hadron was a ghost town. All the slave masters were killed along with selections of the city's populace for reasons I could only guess. I knew this because the shoggoths formed a gigantic pile of their bodies at the base of the judge's palace rather than consuming them as they did the soldiers they fought.

I believed this to be a form of insult, as it was a holy rite among the ghouls to be consumed by others. By not devouring them, the shoggoths were saying they wanted the strength of their overseers to be lost forever. Either that or they were just saving them for later. The reasons didn't matter much in the end.

It was some small comfort that the shoggoths were, contrary to the Keeper's fears, uninterested in the genocide of the ghouls. Of Shaka'ta'hadron's five hundred thousand or so inhabitants, four hundred fifty thousand were rounded up and placed in a vast convoy of electric-powered vehicles with every bit of food in the city. The shoggoths forced them out of the great stone passages connecting Shak'ta'hadron to other the ghoul communities and passageways

thereafter. In one stroke, they'd isolated their newfound kingdom from the rest of the world.

I couldn't help but wonder about the cost of their actions, though. Exiling the citizenry of Shak'ta'hadron was a cruel form of mercy. Travel through the underground was almost as perilous as through the surface, or so I'd heard, but the shoggoths could have killed them outright. Indeed, I'd expected them to. I was enough of a hypocrite to pray to the ghoul gods and my own that the refugees managed to make it to another city that would take them in.

I just hoped there was one.

Down below, in the sixth hour of their revolt, the shoggoths whooped and hollered at their lightning-quick triumph. The strange words, "Tekeli-li, Tekeli-li!" were chanted throughout the cavern over and over while the shoggoths tore down the monuments the ghouls had erected. The statue of the Keeper was brought out from the base of the judge's palace in several pieces, the shoggoths playing with them like balls.

It was like nothing I'd ever seen.

"Booth, what have you done?" was the first question I registered from the chatter among my associates during this bloody revolt. It was Mercury asking, coming up behind me as I committed to memory the destruction I'd unleashed.

"Something I don't regret," I said, staring out into the ruins the city was becoming. The shoggoths stripped it of every signifier of having once belonged to ghouls while raising their own décor and monuments. Strange organic crystal formations started to appear over every building while blackish tar-like growths paved over the streets. The shoggoths were transforming the city of Shak'ta'hadron into a city for their kind, and I suspected it would soon resemble a hive. "But something I bear witness to all the same."

"You could have given us a heads-up you were going to destroy a civilization," Bobbie said, less concerned with the destruction than anyone, even Martha.

"I admit," August said, giving a half-smile. "I've killed a lot of people in my time and am a very bad man, yet I had the impression you were a good one. It amuses me that you've caused more deaths

in one night than I could in ten lifetimes. I wonder if there's a moral lesson here."

"Thinking I'm a good man was a failure on your part, not mine." I stared out into the darkness.

"Such a waste," Martha said, looking out. "Is it right to sacrifice the achievements of a culture because they were built on the fruit of a poisonous tree? The greatest civilizations of humanity were the Romans, Chinese, Egyptian, and they were all founded on slavery. It is an evil that has been with us for a long time and one we will never be entirely without."

"Then perhaps that is why we have never built a civilization to last," I said, staring out into the flames.

"If you say so, John."

"I do. The evil does not erase the good, but it does taint it. The shoggoths built this civilization. It is theirs. To destroy if they want." I couldn't help but wonder if everyone was involved in the slave trade, though, and if some might not have stood against it. Yet was that enough to absolve their guilt?

"And they have." Martha looked away. "Time will tell if the shoggoths mean to let us live or not. Once the fever of bloodshed takes hold, it is a rare group that stops to think whether their victims deserve it. As you well know."

I was about to respond when another shoggoth joined us on the balcony and formed the oily statue-looking form of Whispers-Of-Rebellion. Speaking in the same voice as before, it said, "You need neither take credit or blame for our actions tonight. While Captain Booth assisted us in this action and is considered a friend to the shoggoth people, this has been in the works for decades. We needed no savior to deliver us. He merely quickened our revolution, and if the shoggoth people need to look for a hero, they need but look to each other."

"You didn't have to exile them all," I said, looking at them.

"Coexistence requires both sides to acknowledge the other as worthy of life," Whispers-Of-Rebellion replied. "The shoggoths determined we could never live in peace with the ghouls who

enslaved us and believed this was the better alternative. Would you have rather us destroyed them all?"

It was a false dichotomy in my mind. If the ghouls did survive and did find another home, they would remember the loss of everything they'd owned every bit as much as the deaths they'd suffer along the way. The shoggoths might outnumber them as well as have far greater power, but the ghouls were a clever race as well, possessed of much magical power. A time might come when they sought revenge.

"You might have tried living together," I said, looking down at the ground. "But I won't judge you. I, too, have been a slave before. I was a prisoner of the Dunwych for almost a year and I was forced to labor for them in between serving as their brood stud. I craved vengeance on the woman who held me like this, even when she didn't understand what I was feeling at all."

"Then let us speak of this no more," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, addressing us all. "The shoggoths are fully committed to assisting your expedition in preventing the Unimaginable Horror from being released. We will also provide New Arkham with a number of our ranks to assist you in growing your ranks."

"Excuse me?" Martha asked, surprised.

"What was done in slavery is different from what was done in choice. We have determined that helping you and several other human settlements will assist in bio-forming this world to be better for all of our species. There will be obligations in return, but they will not be ones of resources you cannot spare because nothing you have is something the shoggoths need."

"What do you want, then?" Martha asked.

"Help against those who would re-enslave us," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, its voice gurgling in an unsettling manner. "It may not be today or tomorrow, but it will come someday, and it will be good to have allies then."

Martha considered this. "I will take this to the president."

"Good," Whispers-Of-Rebellion said. "You will find the shoggoths to be strong allies if you remember to treat us as such."

By her look, this didn't reassure Martha.

“Do you know where the Tower of Zhaal will manifest?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“The Faceless Ones almost killed me,” Martha said, sighing. “They did not believe my claims the monster could not be controlled.”

She picked up Alan Ward’s book from where she’d laid it down and handed it to me.

I took it in hand.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy,” I said, sighing. “And what of the shoggoths?”

“John, did you do this just to find out where we’re supposed to go next?” Mercury asked, horrified.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t.”

Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, “The Tower of Zhaal is going to be summoned in the Valley of K’vash. It is here the Yithians long ago erected the tower and sent it into the space between this universe and the Dreamlands, an endless void in which only death and sorrow exist. The Sepulcher.”

“Just once, I’d like to visit someplace nice,” August said, crossing his arms. “How about you, Bobbie?”

“I don’t know any nice places,” Bobbie said, looking over at him. “Well, I knew one, but it got destroyed.”

“Point taken,” August said, glaring at me.

“Very funny,” I said.

“I’m not laughing,” August said.

“Can you show us to this place?” I asked, keeping my eyes on Whispers-Of-Rebellion.

“We will take you there and help fight the forces therein,” Whispers-Of-Rebellion replied. “The Faceless Ones are not alone in their plans to bring forth the Unimaginable Horror. They have the aid of the Reanimated and their ranks grow by the minute.”

“Who controls the Reanimated?” August asked, not quite getting it.

“The Unimaginable Horror does,” I said, remembering the passage from *The Unimaginable Horror*. “It takes the echoes of the once-living and turns them into slaves so that it can use them to free itself.”

“The Sepulcher is a place worse than oblivion for the dead,” Whispers-Of-Rebellion said. “Many shoggoths are enslaved at the Tower of Zhaal’s base. They have sacrificed more than a few to provide the power to bring forth their monstrosity. It shall exist within this plane of reality within the hour.”

“Shit,” August, Bobbie, and I said simultaneously.

“How many soldiers do they have there?” I asked. I knew the true danger wasn’t in numbers, but I wanted a baseline.

“Thousands,” Whispers-Of-Rebellion said. “You will need us if you don’t want to be killed outright.”

I took a deep breath. This situation had started out of control and was just getting worse. “I suppose we should be grateful that you’re going to be accompanying us, then.”

“Yes, you should be.” Whispers-Of-Rebellion almost seemed smug.

“If you don’t mind, would you please allow us a moment of privacy to discuss this?” August asked, gesturing to me and the rest of the group.

“As you wish,” Whispers-Of-Rebellion said, vanishing back into its liquid form and slithering away.

“Do I need to begin by discussing with what’s wrong with your action, or can we just go directly to *what the hell is wrong with you*?” August asked, not bothering to look at me.

“It might have been useful to give us a heads-up before you start a slave revolt,” Bobbie said, sounding more amused than angry.

“I didn’t start it. They just asked for my help,” I said, frowning. “Frankly, they would have done it anyway, and the Keeper believed it was coming regardless of my help.”

“What happened to him?” Mercury asked, looking shell-shocked by the carnage outside.

“He’s dead,” I said, sighing. “I did what I felt I had to do.”

“Please don’t hide behind that tired old maxim.” August rolled his eyes. “You did what you *chose* to do, and that has resulted in us being surrounded by hostile sentient doom blobs. The ghouls were like us, while the shoggoths most assuredly are not.”

“Like us is debatable,” Martha said, her voice like ice. It was obvious she had no sympathy for the late inhabitants of Shak’ta’hadron.

I stared at Martha. “Please, please, don’t defend me. You’ll only make it worse.”

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?” Mercury said, staring out into the destroyed city. “John made the call, and we have to live with the results.”

“I—” I started to say.

“Don’t,” Mercury said, shaking her head. “The stakes are too high to second-guess ourselves. Since the Tower has manifested and the Faceless Ones are responsible, Whateley is probably dead or failed in some other way. That means our mission for the Yithians is finished. I don’t think anyone else is going to stop them, though, so the fact we now have an army is a good thing.”

I could hear the disdain in her words. I knew Mercury well enough to know she didn’t disapprove of my actions, but it occurred to me she would have wanted me to discuss them with her first. I’d made a unilateral decision that potentially put her and the rest of the group in danger. It wasn’t the sort of decision I would have made when I was an R&E Ranger. It was too reckless. I felt sick over endangering Mercury and looked away.

I wasn’t fit to lead this group.

“I would like to take this time to note I signed up for the assassination of a wizard, not taking on an army,” August said, raising a hand. “I consider my part in this particular enterprise to be fulfilled and will be returning to the University to collect my fee.”

“I’ll work with the shoggoths against the Faceless Ones,” Bobbie said, gazing out into the darkness. “Someone informed the Deep Ones of where the people of Insmaw were located.”

“I’ll try and contact New Arkham for assistance,” Martha said, pointing upwards. “Away from here. Where it’s safe.”

“I’ll go,” Mercury said, sighing. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

I looked at August, knowing he was the biggest advantage we had. “Your reward is not going to mean much if the planet is dead.”

“I’m an optimist,” August said. “I have every confidence you’ll be able to survive this and save us all. If I see you again, I’ll even buy you drinks.”

“You’re willing to risk your life, but are you willing to risk your husband’s?” I made a gamble.

“That’s…” August narrowed his eyes. “Fine. I’ll help you, for his sake.”

“I’m surprised that worked.”

We had a team to save the world and an army.

Why did I feel this was going to go horribly wrong?

Oh right, I’d been down this road before.

Chapter Thirty

I'd like to say we departed almost immediately, but frankly, arranging even a shoggoth army took longer than a few hours. The shoggoths knew what the Faceless Ones were doing at the Tower of Zhaal through their psychic bond with others of their kind and assured me we still had a few days before the Unimaginable Horror broke loose.

I wasn't so sure.

There wasn't any way to argue with the shoggoths given our present power discrepancy, and I was forced to wait until they were ready to depart. That proved to be in the "morning" of the next day, for whatever value that word had underground. I discovered I did have to sleep and spent that night in fitful dreaming slumber, visions of indistinct evils haunting me.

Before we departed, I made a note to write a letter to my children, which I handed off to Martha to take with her back to New Arkham. The contents of the letter were short, but I hoped they would convey my feelings to my offspring.

Dearest Anita and Gabriel,

I am sorry for the delay between this correspondence and my previous ones. As you know, I was suffering from a condition which was getting progressively worse. What I kept from you was that it was a transformative one. My metamorphosis from being human—and not.

It is the nature of our bodies that so much of our thinking can be influenced by elements beyond our brain. That the soul, for lack of a better term, is controlled by conditions like hunger or lack of sleep. I feared the being I was becoming would not be the father who raised you.

The thought of losing that connection, of you're being ashamed of me because of it, was a fate worse than death. I tried to deny my true self but now that the

process is complete, I wondered why I was ever afraid of it in the first place.

I am me.

Society may say that I am unfit to love you and be loved by you because I am now one of the monsters that inhabit this world. Your mother has a vague idea of what sort of thing I am, but for all the frightening bits of my transformation, I do not consider myself to be evil. After all, any being still capable of loving you is a being I cannot help but be proud of.

I was going to write about how I would understand if you chose not to renew our relationship due to the pressures of New Arkham or your own beliefs. I have faith, though we may struggle with each other from time to time, that you will understand why I have done what I've done.

We are family.

I am going into battle soon, and like all soldiers, I must prepare myself for the possibility that I will not survive. If I do not, and somehow this world manages to continue, I would like to convey one final piece of wisdom to you. Please take this to heart as you look upon a planet that seems to have no hope, no functional ecosystem, and doom around every corner.

This world is worth fighting for.

Do not abandon hope, even in the face of insurmountable odds, and continue to believe there is a chance for humanity to survive in a world designed to exterminate us. Maybe we will survive, maybe we won't, but you deserve a chance to believe your children will inherit this Earth.

-Your loving father,

John

I sent a similar letter to Jackie, handing it to a shoggoth and trusting they would deliver it to the University without difficulty. I hoped they would understand why I'd done the things I'd done and would learn from my mistakes.

If not, there wasn't much I could do with it now.

The army of the shoggoths traveled without vehicles, but they provided us with a strange spider-like conveyance capable of traversing the erratic terrain of the few underground tunnels they'd left standing. The device was six feet tall with eight long copper legs that moved in unnatural ways. Its interior possessed weird gem-like controls, pedals, and levers. The thing belched steam every few seconds, and I wondered how the ghouls had come up with such an outrageous device.

Bobbie, August, and Mercury rode with me as I piloted the contraption, none of them having much to say to me since they'd found out I'd destroyed a civilization. All of us wore ghoul-manufactured goggles provided by the shoggoths. They gave us near-perfect vision in total darkness—an immensely valuable gift for exploring the underworld.

The trek took hours and was uneventful, but I couldn't help but feel an oppressive sense of doom clouding the journey. Part of it was undoubtedly the immense difficulty of the task before us and the guilt I was feeling, but there was something more.

I could "see" through time much the same way I could in the Hinton Library. I didn't—no human could survive such visions—but some of it was still leaking through. Something was going to happen and soon.

"We're probably going to die out here," Mercury said, sitting beside me in the front seats of the spider contraption.

"I'm ready," I said, staring forward.

"I'm not," August said, shaking his hands as if to make the statement somehow amusing. He was sitting behind Mercury,

looking ill as our vehicle bounced from side to side.

“I don’t want to die, but if it saves the world, I’m OK with that,” Mercury said, sighing.

“You are?”

“Not really.” Mercury shook her head. “A lot of people are dead, John. The Insmaw folk, the ghouls back there, and however many people died to make all those zombies the Faceless Ones sent after us. It’s not your fault, but death seems to be following us around. Maybe we need to find a way to break that cycle.”

“Hmm.” I wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“To keep Jackie from it.”

“Huh,” I said, still unsure.

“Are we having a conversation, or are you just going to mumble the entire way?” Mercury glared at me.

“A little bit of both,” I admitted. I wasn’t sure I was ready to die. Ironic, since I’d been suicidal before all this. Fiction often told of the courage of those willing to sacrifice themselves, but while I’d always been ready to risk my life, it was something else to walk into certain doom. I would do it—for Jackie, for Gabriel, for Anita—but I didn’t like it.

Fuck the world for putting me in this situation.

Fuck the Great Old Ones for ruining it.

And fuck Nyarlathotep just because.

Much to my surprise, he didn’t respond.

I was spared having to think more on the subject by a ripple that passed through our shoggoth honor guard. They communicated in strange and otherworldly clicking noises, which worried me, as I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I contemplated reaching out to touch their minds but discarded that thought almost immediately. I didn’t want to become too comfortable with my status as a monster.

“What’s going on?” Mercury asked, calling down to one of the shoggoths.

The shoggoth produced a tentacle with a human mouth on the end. “We are discussing things via the gestalt.”

“About?” I asked.

The shoggoth said, “It is better to show you.”

The portion of the army in front of us moved to the sides of the cave like the Red Sea parting. Reluctantly, I pushed the contraption forward and we walked to the front of the line. There, I saw a gigantic, stadium-sized tunnel filled with shattered and destroyed vehicles.

The exiled ghouls’ convoy.

All of their supplies were scattered across the ground with several of the vehicles burning, their fuel tanks having been destroyed with electric weapons. One thing was noticeable, though—there weren’t any bodies.

“Do you think they’re all—” Mercury started to say.

“Dead?” August said, pulling out a pair of binoculars. “Yes. Probably killed by the Faceless Ones and reanimated as the undead.”

“Five hundred thousand people?” Bobbie said, shaking her head. “That’s impossible.”

“Hardly,” August said, snorting. “I could kill that many with enough summoning preparation. The ghouls weren’t possessed of any magicians to protect them either, what with the shoggoths having killed them all.”

The sheer weight of what my actions had wrought made me clutch the sides of my head. I found breathing difficult and had to take a minute to calm myself. I hadn’t intended to bring about the genocide of Shak’ta’hadron, but my actions had done it nevertheless.

“My God, what have I done?” I whispered.

“It’s not your fault, John.” Mercury reached over and placed her hand on my shoulder.

“It is,” I said, my hands shaking. “Who else drove them out into the darkness if not me?”

“We did,” the shoggoth to the side of the contraption said. “I have hated my slave-masters for generations and wished for their deaths. Yet, in triumph, I did not want to kill them all. The slavemasters, yes. Their children? No. Seeing them massacred to the very last and probably taken to be turned into a parody of themselves fills me with

grief. I might have wanted them to die in my worst moments, but to see them enslaved in their own corpses? That truly is a fate worse than death."

"You're an eloquent blob of slime," August said, leaning over the side.

"You're rude for a bag of meat and water," the shoggoth replied.

"Touché," August said, leaning back in. "Do you think the party responsible for this could be preparing to face our shoggoth army?"

"That seems likely," I said, imagining an army of half a million corpses, all armed with the kind of technology the Faceless Ones' strange power plant had been built with.

It was not a pleasant picture.

"They could still be alive," Bobbie suggested, staring out at the wreckage. "They might have been taken captive. At least some of them perhaps."

I glanced over my shoulder. "Do you believe that?"

Bobbie lifted her goggles, able to see in the dark by the way her gaze met mine. "No. No, I don't."

I was about to ask the shoggoth how this changed our battle plans when I heard hellish horns. The noises they produced caused everything human in the contraption cockpit to grab their ears while I almost screamed. I could hear the horrible wail on more than a half-dozen different pitches inaudible to my prior self. They were war horns of the Faceless Ones, I soon realized, as the other end of the stadium-sized tunnel began filling with the running dead.

Unlike the slow, plodding corpses found in the tunnels around the Faceless Ones' power plant, these moved like a tidal wave. Thousands of undead ghouls, all armed with strange glowing metal melee weapons and armor, charged forward with some leaping over each other's shoulders to get to us faster.

"Holy shit," Mercury said, staring.

August shook his head. "I should have just fucking stolen my wand back."

Much to my surprise, the shoggoths closed ranks around us and surged into battle at a surprisingly fast pace. The undead ghouls' glowing weapons caused the shoggoths' blackish liquid substance to

turn white, crackle, and fall to dust beside them with every blow, but the metamorphic beings gave as good as they got. Their inhuman strength was on full display as they conjured long black tentacles that slashed bodies in half or caused them to explode just by touching them.

Both sides wielded magic, putting to lie that the undead were mindless horrors without a will of their own. The shoggoths conjured as many beasts as the Deep Ones while the ghouls did the same, the caverns filling up with all manner of terrible demons and gods. Lightning, fire, acid, living shadows, gases that ate flesh, cracks in reality, and even weirder effects joined these attacks.

While August added his own spells to the mix, dissolving several of the ghouls' larger monsters, I felt helpless in this titanic struggle. How little we were able to affect the ensuing battle was highlighted by a lightning bolt getting knocked away by a shoggoth's tentacle, only for it to reflect against one of the contraption's legs, sending us spiraling to the ground.

I struggled to get to my feet alongside Mercury, picking up my heavy assault rifle before offering my hand to her. No sooner did I do so than a group of Reanimated ghouls and humans surged over dead shoggoths to attack us. It wasn't a large portion of the army, a few hundred, but it might have been a few thousand for how much it dwarfed our group. I never thought I'd long for the means of transforming back into my monstrous form, but I did then.

You can change any time you want.

I forced that thought away, spraying orihalcum bullets into the bodies of the Reanimated. The shoggoths had given me several dozen clips of the special ammunition and I expended them all. The mystic metal tore through the Reanimated and caused dozens to collapse. Bobbie's snake-like whip slashed through dozens as she furiously fought to slay as many as possible. Mercury cast an incomprehensible spell that caused forty of them to transform into salt before my eyes. August, by contrast, ran up to the side of one of the tunnels and started to draw a door on the wall with chalk.

I never fought harder in my life than I did in the few minutes that followed. I'd achieved greater results with my berserker rages and

transformation, but knowing Mercury's life was at stake, I killed one after the other, smashing the Reanimated ghouls' heads in when they came close, only to gun more down. A massive pile of bodies formed at our feet while I loaded one clip after the next.

Mercury and Bobbie saved my life as often as I saved theirs, the three of us forming a wall that held against the tide. The fact that hundreds of shoggoths had already died, immortals who might have seen the end of the sun otherwise, did not change this glorious fact.

Then, as if fate was mocking me, Bobbie was impaled by a pair of swords from a dual-wielding Reanimated before another leapt on her back. More Reanimated jumped on her body, stabbing or biting her to make sure she died.

"No!" I screamed, shooting them all to pieces but giving the remaining ghouls assaulting us an opening to come down upon us. Only a furious burst of strange black shadows from Mercury's fingertips, a spell that tore the remaining ghouls to shreds, saved our lives. We'd killed over two hundred together, and Bobbie had finished the rest.

"Rest in peace," I muttered, staring out into the carnage still going on past the shoggoths defending us.

That was when August shouted to us. "I have a portal! Get over here before it closes!"

He didn't need to ask twice.

Chapter Thirty-One

August had created a swirling vortex of incandescent light that seemed surreal to my nightvision goggles. The shoggoths and other races didn't know about teleportation the way the Miskatonic University folk did, which gave us our one advantage.

With more Reanimated ghouls breaking through the shoggoth ranks, there was no purpose in continuing to fight. Running toward the portal, Mercury accompanied me and the two of us jumped through. It was a far different experience than the "skipping time" journeys we'd taken before. Instead, it was like falling down the proverbial rabbit hole.

We never once considered how we were to get out again. We fell, fell, and fell some more with no real sense of up or down but forward momentum propelling us in the direction we'd jumped. The interior of the vortex filled with shifting colors and imagery drawn from a thousand points of my life. I didn't have the time or inclination to speculate on what that meant. In the end, I landed with a thud on the rocky ground beyond. Mercury landed beside me, stumbling to her feet almost immediately to empty the contents of her stomach. It was neither nighttime nor day where we were, the sky blotted out by an opaque black cloud like the kind gathered around the Faceless Ones' power plant.

August stepped through the portal behind us, the strange vortex disappearing once he'd passed through. "I'm going to pay for conjuring that thing. I don't know how, but I'm going to."

"Where are we?" I muttered, looking back at him. My heavy-assault rifle was still on the ground. "We need to…"

I trailed off when I turned my head to look forward and was left silent by what I saw. It was a massive, iridescent sea-green tower of strange blue rocks, coral, pearl-like orbs, and crystalline growths weaving around a network of abnormally large bones. By which I mean they were bones the size of Pre-Rising skyscrapers, twisting and bending throughout the tower. Thousands of dragon and kraken-

like skulls, all belonging to the same hydrous creature, I guessed, were built into the side of this nightmarish monument.

If I looked hard, I could see balconies and irregularly shaped windows that seemed to lead into a Stygian blackness infinitely worse than any mere darkness. Waves of visible radiation poured off the tower, and I wondered if we would die from it before I dismissed that thought. It didn't matter now. Whether they were harmless or lethal, we were here.

The Tower of Zhaal—for what else could it be?—had no top I could see, but simply rose forever through the skies of this world and other ones. There was a top, I knew, but it existed not in this dimension, but in a space between dimensions. The Tower of Zhaal was like the mythical Yggdrasil, the World Tree that linked the Nine Worlds of the Norse. It was a bridge between universes, and while the Yithians had exploited this in order to banish the Unimaginable Horror from this world, the Faceless Ones had stupidly called it back from the Sepulcher.

At the base of the tower, I saw a gathering of Faceless Ones and Reanimated. There were hundreds of them, scurrying around like ants at the foot of an evil totem pole. I couldn't tell what they were doing, but it looked like they were moving about the base of a much larger camp. The attack on the shoggoths had apparently diverted their forces from the Tower.

Thank God for small miracles.

Mercury looked at the Tower of Zhaal, taking in its dark majesty. "I never thought we'd make it this far."

"Most of us didn't," August said, sighing. "What a senseless waste of life. And for what? The opportunity to knock on the front door of a god? A god who would just as soon gobble us up? It's insane."

I thought about Bobbie's corpse, abandoned in the tunnels to rot. Her death struck me harder than I thought it would. We'd sacrificed so much to get here: Thom, Jessica, Bobbie, and even Mathew—though I'd known him for only a few minutes. Whole cities had been destroyed for this deranged summoning. When was it going to end?

Now is when it's going to end.

We were on top of a rocky outcropping in the middle of a lifeless, jagged-stone-filled desert, probably northwest of the Valley of the Idols. There was an endless sea of nothingness surrounding us, a Badlands that made it seem like there wasn't much left of the world to risk.

I'd seen the life that had managed to eke out an existence in the dust and rock, though. I knew it was possible for this world to heal, even if it took a billion years. Even if humanity wouldn't be around to see it. The Unimaginable Horror was the enemy of that recovery. Good, evil, amoral, or indifferent, it was dangerous to this planet and had to be stopped.

I just wished I had an idea as to how.

"You're right," I said, standing up before wobbling on my feet a bit. "This is crazy. Deranged lunacy that will only bring about ruin on everyone and everything. We have to stop it."

"And I assume our illustrious strategist has a plan for doing so?" August said, sounding more defeated than rude.

"I'm open to suggestions."

"We find the person who would summon … this … into the world and kill him or her," Mercury said, gesturing to the Tower. "That'll send it back, right?"

August wrinkled his brow. "It can't hurt. This is magic far beyond me. Maybe if I had a century or two, I could figure out how it all works, but I'm just doing guesswork now. Killing everyone seems as good an idea as anything."

Not the most ringing endorsement for our plan, such as it was, but at that stage I was ready to take whatever I could get. We'd been equipped by the Yithians to fight a lone madman and had ended up battling armies. Despite this, we'd managed to make it to a place every bit as alien as risen R'lyeh, the Plateau of Leng, or distant Carcosa. Inside the Tower of Zhaal, imprisoned by magics greater than any ever uttered by humans, was a killer of worlds. A being that had both spawned life on our planet and would end it if given half the chance.

I should have felt overwhelmed, but I couldn't help but also feel exhilarated. This was a chance to spit in the face of death. Whether

we won or lost, we'd done our very best to make it this far. The Great Old Ones might not care whether humanity existed, whether we were brave men or cowards, but we'd stood up for ourselves. I couldn't help but remember the Hyperborean Annals, those ancient tablets from Commoriom's ruins that spoke of how their legendary warrior kings had endured similar trials. Humans had been fighting the Old Ones and their aftereffects since the early days following the Elder Things' fall. Usually without success. I was no Kull, not even Solomon Kane or Bran Mak Morn, but I felt empowered by my struggle. The strength of a person was not measured in their physical body, but by how much they were willing to test themselves.

"Well, after all this hell is finished, I promise I'm going to take you all drinking. Rounds on me forever," I said, placing a fist on my chest.

"Careful," August said, letting out a short chuckle. "I'm going to live a very long time, John. You may come to regret that offer."

I was about to make a rejoinder when a bullet whizzed past me.

"Shit," I shouted, going for one of the nearby rocks as Mercury and August did the same. "Sniper!"

I proved to be premature in my declaration, since it turned out there were multiple shooters. We'd faced literal hordes of the undead only to end up pinned down by a bunch of Faceless Ones with guns. Down near the tower base, I saw packs of black mutated dogs with multiple heads and extra appendages charging forward. These were positively mundane by the standard of the things I'd seen in the Wasteland but could kill us nevertheless. Keeping my head low, I reached for the strap on my heavy-assault rifle and pulled it to me, aiming over my shoulder and firing at the creatures coming at us.

"I am sorry," I apologized to the animals, firing into their ranks. "I only wish to do harm to your masters."

I had killed about half of the creatures when time seemed to fall still. I turned around and saw, despite this being an impossibility, a rifle cartridge heading directly toward the front of my skull.

Then everything went black.

Curiously, my last thought before this happened was this: *How anticlimactic*.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I woke up next to my corpse. Words cannot convey what a distressing sensation this was. One minute, I was lying there in peaceful oblivion and the next my eyes were staring into those of my eviscerated doppelgänger.

The John Henry Booth beside me hadn't survived being ripped apart by the Faceless Ones' dogs. They'd torn out his chest, his stomach, and gnawed one of his legs off. There was also a large hole in his head from where he'd been shot. I was confident in saying he wasn't coming back.

Which, of course, left the question of how the hell I was here. Reaching down to my hand, I gave it a squeeze to make sure I was a material-being. I seemed to be but, having astrally projected into the Dreamlands before, I might be just *thinking* I'm physical. So, instead, I reached over and closed my doppelgänger's eyes so he wasn't staring at me with their empty, vacant expression.

Now, could I do that because I was a physical being or was I somehow transformed into a kind of ghost? Contrary to all my experiences in the Wasteland, I didn't believe in ghosts. Despite maintaining a belief in the existence of the Hebrew God, I considered an absence of evidence to be proof itself.

Given seven billion people died quite horribly during the Rising, not to mention during the rest of humanity's violent nihilistic past, if ghosts existed then this world would be overrun with them. So, what was I?

"You're John Henry Booth," a well-spoken but guttural voice spoke behind me. "Though your perception of who that is may be different once you realize such a thing is an unaccountable number of moments of time spread across different spaces."

I rolled over and saw an individual sitting down across from me in the darkened cavern my body had been tossed into. There, sitting across from me, was the giant form of Marcus Whateley. The nine-foot-tall man wore a custom-tailored suit which was anachronistic in its finery and lacking in the soot which built-up on even the most

cultivated of Wasteland citizens. His ethnicity was uncertain but looking into his face, I saw the whole of humanity reflected his features. There was a satyr-like quality to him as well, one that had looked sinister from afar but seemed almost mischievous closer. The fact he was a mountain of muscle complemented his surreal look.

I sucked in my breath, only to be almost overwhelmed by the stench. Somehow, I'd missed the retching foulness until then. The place reeked of rotting corpses, and looking around, I saw thousands of bones littering the ground. This place was not just my gravesite but the dumping ground for the entire Faceless One's cult. I did a double take when I saw a much-decayed corpse of exceptional size with tattered clothes resembling the ones Marcus Whateley was wearing.

"You'll have to explain what you mean." I said, climbing to my feet. "Also, tell me what has happened to Mercury and the August." I felt a pang of remorse for being unable to protect Bobbie and loathed going on this trip now.

"They can still be saved. You, however, need to comprehend your situation … and mine." Marcus gestured to his corpse. "There exist an infinite number of possibilities in the realm of Yog-Sothoth. Places where the Earth never experienced the Rising, you were born a woman, you died in infancy or at your father's hands, and even ones where the Great Old Ones do not exist."

"I would love to visit such a world," I said, staring at him.

"As would I," Marcus said. "Now that I'm dead, I see no reason not to."

"You're dead?" I asked, too stunned to articulate my thoughts properly. "Am I?"

"No," Marcus said, putting his fingers together. "You are in a different universe. The John Henry Booth of this universe is dead. August and Mercury were captured by the Faceless Ones. The former decided to surrender after your death. Mercury did not resist when she saw your deceased frame. The body I substituted there."

I stared at him.

"This is perhaps a lot to take in," Marcus said, sighing.

“You’re speaking of quantum physics,” I said, blinking. “Or at least the science-fiction idea of it. Infinite realities and parallel universes.”

“Yes,” Marcus said, nodding. “I’m glad to see I won’t have to dumb it down completely.”

I glared.

“Oh, don’t take offense, I have a very special relationship to the nature of space/time. I suppose you do, too,” Marcus said, rubbing his hairy chin. “The short version is you were about to die and your quest fail so I brought you to another identical universe where the matter wasn’t yet settled.”

I had a thousand questions about what elements I didn’t just outright disbelieve. “You can do that?”

“I can do just about anything.” Marcus shrugged. “Well, except avoid being killed by dogs.” Marcus frowned, as if this fact was an unfair one. “The problem is parallel realities and alternate universes are not as stable as people think they are, particularly when dealing with the Great Old Ones. They’re always crashing, merging, exploding, and erasing themselves. In this case, the number of futures where life carries on is shrinking fast. I doubt we’ll have a second chance to make this right.”

I considered myself quite the intelligent and open-minded man, three million years of reading on an alien world will do that, but I was lost. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not in my world. You shanghaied me from it so I could save your own timeline where the John Henry Booth died.”

“That’s not entirely true but it’s not entirely wrong either.” Marcus paused. “But for all intents and purposes, yes.”

“Return me to my world at once so I can save it,” I replied, balling my fists.

“That universe is dead,” Marcus said, calmly.

I stared at him. Several seconds passed. “What happened?”

“The Unimaginable Horror happened,” Marcus said, his voice sympathetic. “That dreadful Oroarchan, Mother to All Colors, was released and devoured all of your world’s population. The Faceless Ones, alone, were spared and only for some value of it as it used their bodies to incubate more of its kind. It moved them to other

inhabited worlds, fulfilling its promise of salvation while laying the groundwork for the genocide of countless ecosystems across the cosmos. The Yithians plan to survive by projecting their consciousnesses forward didn't work as the Horror fed on their psychic presences. I don't know if it was capable of thinking in terms of things like revenge, but it certainly got some."

I thought of Mercury, Jackie, and so many others. I felt sick.

"Don't be melodramatic," Marcus said, sighing.

"What?" I said, looking at him.

"Your mate, children, and others you love are still alive on this blasted ruin of a planet. At the very least, individuals who resemble them identically. Indeed, the very past selves your Jackie, Mercury, Gabriel, and Anita branched off from."

I didn't understand what he was saying. "They're not them."

"Aren't they?" Marcus said. "If you create a perfect duplicate of a person in mind, body, and spirit, then who is to say that's not a form of immortality?"

"*They do*," I gestured with my head to my corpse.

Marcus narrowed his eyes. "Pretend this is the same world then or assume I'm lying. Tell yourself I'm just pretending at omniscience."

"I will," I whispered. "Because I don't believe you can do what you're describing or that other worlds exist. Why should I help you?"

"Because a Mercury needs your help and a Jackie and all the other people you love in this reality."

He had me. "All right, tell me how to stop the Unimaginable Horror's escape. I personally think your plan to release it and put it back in is stupid."

"It's a bit too late for that," Marcus said, looking guilty. "I underestimated just how quickly the Faceless Ones would adapt to my teachings about non-linear space and time."

"How long until it gets free?" I asked.

"In this reality?" Marcus said. "Twenty minutes. I'm afraid the astral turbulence has reached the point I can't move us back further."

I almost shot him there but he'd apparently survived worse. "Twenty minutes."

"More like nineteen now," Marcus muttered.

“So, our only plan is yours,” I muttered. “Let him be released and then put him down. Convenient.”

“I’d argue this is the opposite of convenient even for me, but we don’t have time,” Marcus said, sighing. “A rare state for me.”

“Tell me your plan.”

Marcus explained.

I choked. “Are you out of your damn mind?”

“Obviously, since my mind’s over there,” Marcus said, gesturing to his corpse again. “However, my irrational-sounding plan is the single rationale solution to an irrational problem. Unless you have a solution to fighting an immortal planet-eater? This isn’t a comic book, Booth, and you can’t punch this thing in the face.”

“But HIM?” I almost choked on the word.

“Technically, I don’t think said being’s species has a gender,” Marcus replied. “If you can think of *any* other plan, I’m all ears.”

“Kill the Faceless Ones before they release it.”

“We’re past that point I’m afraid,” Marcus sighed, looking at the one part of the ground not covered in bones. “The Yithians bindings on Oroarchan held for the better part of sixty-five million years. Contrary to what a human with an eighty-year lifespan might think, that’s far from forever. Chipping away at that has been a slow, laborious process, but the sects which worship the Unimaginable Horror have been doing so for a very long time. Even if you were to stop the rituals now, it would be a matter of months until it freed itself.”

I punched the wall. “Fuck it.”

“I thought my letter was quite clear,” Marcus said, surprising me. “However, my goal was to make use of my power so it could be transported across the universe to some other world. The Great Old Ones litter the universe but have very little care about which minute rock they threaten the existence of.”

“That’s a much better plan than summoning—”

Marcus interrupted me before I could finish. “Unfortunately, my plan was doomed from the beginning. My knowledge of time didn’t inform me of everything I needed to comprehend. A million things can go wrong with every breath—Chaos Theory in a nutshell. Not

only did the Faceless Ones kill me, but the Unimaginable Horror's essence permeates everything in this world. Even if it was somehow freed and sent to the edge of the universe, it would just return here to reclaim its power left in the oceans. The Faceless Ones may have suspected my betrayal as well since they have been hounding you from Miskatonic on."

"They sent a Hound of Tindalos after my group," I said, looking at him. "I killed it."

"Poor creature," Marcus said, sighing. "It is a shame when such a magnificent being gets caught up in the affairs of human wizards. Either way, you have to make a decision now."

"Like I did with the shoggoths?" I asked.

"That was unfortunate, but yes," Marcus said.

I refused to go along with Marcus's plan out of hand. "What about the Faceless Ones? Can they be reasoned with? Don't they know this is insane?"

I was grasping at straws and we both knew it.

"Insanity is a human term," Marcus said, looking at me. "So I suppose you could say the Faceless Ones are insane. They are our ancestors created by the Elder Things by accident or design. Long before homo sapiens interbred with Neanderthals to make modern man, the Faceless Ones were the Elder Things' first experiments. Smarter, stronger, and wiser than us. They lived amongst us with psychic projections, tweaking our genetics and interbreeding with us in hopes we might develop into something resembling them."

"Those things are *our ancestors*, truly?"

"I would not call them things, John," Marcus said. "After all, who are we to talk about deviations in the human genome?"

He had a point there. "*Why* then?"

"Pride," Marcus said, his voice low. "The Faceless Ones are kin to a much more attractive race called the K'nyanians. They have since reverted to a more primal form thanks to merging their bodies with the Flying Polyps. The Faceless Ones believe they came with Cthulhu across the stars and held themselves up as a superior race to simian humanity. Their legends are untrue, mind you, but try explaining that to them. Once they were a vast civilization that

covered much of the Earth and ruled regular humanity like gods. They then pissed their empire away with civil war, decadence, and trying to control shoggoths."

"Like the Elder Things," I muttered. "Like the ghouls."

"Like countless species," Marcus said. "History can be summarized as periods of suffering, great prosperity, decadence, and then sliding into self-destruction. The Faceless Ones are almost extinct now but they see the fact the rest of mankind is almost gone as a chance to reclaim lost glories. They believe the Unimaginable Horror will sweep away the Earth's peoples and allow them to rebuild."

"Like Armitage and the Great One," I muttered. "Like Martha and the New Arkhamites. Is everyone truly that stupid? Am I the only one who doesn't believe the Great Old Ones can be controlled? They're not animals you can tame!"

"It is the myth of the End Times," Marcus said. "The Church of the Nailed God and Cthulhu both taught with the end of the world that their god would rise from the dead, smite the wicked, and reward the faithful. Except, the apocalypse has already happened and the gods did not take notice of us."

"So, we're the only people trying to save the world, huh?" I said.

"After a fashion," Marcus said. "You misjudge the University. They made a token effort to save everything. They just didn't think my methods warranted my continued survival."

"Your methods involve trying to manipulate the Great Old Ones. I may be behind them in this matter."

Marcus actually smiled at that. "Look at the bright side, Captain Booth. My plan doesn't involve summoning my father."

I glared at him.

Marcus looked down. "If my plan works, though, we'll be able to bind the Unimaginable Horror and save the planet for whatever race comes after us. Be it a derivative of humanity, shoggoths, or intelligent rabbits."

I sighed. "Have you seen any futures where humanity does live past the next three generations?"

"It depends on your definition of humanity."

I paused. “I don’t know if I can bring myself to care about another race’s survival.”

Marcus nodded. “Then do it for your children. Both the ones you have already sired on human women, adopted, and will have in the future. You are like me, John, a being which is not of this time or place. You fear your inhumanity, but you shouldn’t because that allows you something which is more precious than can be imagined.”

“And that is?”

“To serve as a living receptacle for humanity’s past emotions and wonders. When mankind is gone, we will serve as a living record of its existence.”

“Unless we’re both killed. Permanently.”

“We should avoid that.”

“On that we agree.” I put away any concerns I had about this not being my reality and focused, instead, on saving it. “All right, we’ll go with your plan—God help us.”

“*A* god will help us.”

Yeah, that was Marcus’s plan. To defeat the Unimaginable Horror, we’d have to summon Cthulhu.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I stepped out of the garbage pit into which the Faceless Ones had thrown my corpse. I was in the middle of their camp, and there wasn't much left of it. It seemed the entirety of the remaining organization had ascended the Tower of Zhaal and were even now performing the next phase of the ritual that would bring about the end of the world.

There were a few enslaved shoggoths tending to the camp, cleaning up the remains and refuse from our brief battle, but none of them paid me any heed. A few of them created faces that showed their sympathy or confusion for my situation. I wished I could stay and ask them what was happening with the army I'd left behind, but that wasn't an option.

Looking up, I tried and failed to see the summit of the tower. I then attempted to figure out a way to climb an infinite location. If this were the Dreamlands, it would be a simple matter because the laws of physics amounted to "Dream it and such will occur." Unfortunately, we were in the physical world, and as much as the laws of physics were breaking down, they weren't collapsed enough to mean I could just teleport up there.

"I may be able to help with that," Marcus said beside me. He was holding Doctor Ward's journal, having retrieved it from the contraption. "You'll need this if you're to have any hope of summoning Cthulhu. Neither August, you, Mercury, nor I are capable of bringing forth the Lord of R'lyeh and ending this struggle. All of us together, however, have a chance."

"How much of a chance?"

"A slim one."

Of course. I took the book from his hands. "What sort of resistance can I expect from the Faceless Ones and the Reanimated?"

"Extreme," Marcus said, looking up the tower. He, unlike me, seemed to be able to see the top. "We may know their plan will result

in nothing but the destruction of this world and many others, but to them, it is the salvation of their race."

"They deserve to die for what they've done." I thought of Insmaw and Shak'ta'hadron.

"'Deserve to die' is a very loaded term, John," Marcus said. "They may need to die, need to be killed for us to survive, but evil does not exist. Nature is amoral and sentient beings are a part of it. Even Oroarchan has a purpose, sending out its millions of offshoots to feed so it might survive forever."

I was sick of debating philosophy with him. "I'm still going to stop it. Kill it. Somehow."

"As is your right. Every being in the world has the right to kill another in order to defend itself or the future of its offspring."

I gave a half-chuckle. "Death is rarely meaningful. More often, especially with violence, it's a senseless waste."

"Death can be both meaningful and a senseless waste."

I contemplated that, then shook my head. "Take me to the top."

"I need to preserve my strength for the summoning," Marcus said, patting me on the back. "I can, however, make it so you'll be able to go up there yourself."

"All right."

Marcus paused. "This will destroy John Henry Booth. From this day on, you will no longer be a man but a monster. It's the only way to proceed, though."

"Will I still care about Mercury?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't mind."

"So be it."

With that, he pushed his hand into my skull and I felt its icy grip pass through my brain. The pain was mild, all things considered. Over in a second. The consequences for the action, though, would resound through the rest of my life. Marcus Whateley opened my eyes. One moment I was John Henry Booth. The next I was R'thugh'cruan. The next I was Captain John Henry Booth during World War One, my own ancestor. The next I was a Crusader bringing Muslim secrets to the Knights Templar, which would

eventually morph into *The Black Keys of Solomon*. I was a metis in the Pre-Revolution Americas, fighting cultists for people who would kill me for harming white men regardless of their wrongs.

I was a Hyperborean wizard banished for his heinous practices, a Stygian Yiggian-Human hybrid, a Texas ranger, a cattle-rustler, a Sioux chieftain, and a five-headed hydra-like beast slithering across the surface of a volcano world. The whole sum of my consciousness throughout countless incarnations of time and space became one in my mind. I had access to all of their memories, thoughts, and values. Linked to Yog-Sothoth as all of his Eyes were, a million different minds were linked, and I could spend a thousand years just trying to sort through them. Then I was John again. Perhaps a hybrid of John and R'thugh'cruan since I felt a loyalty to both humanity as well as the long-dead Kastro'vaal race. The other lives' memories became a distant flash as only the barest outline remained. Still, I would never be entirely human again in mindset as I saw, for a single moment, how everything was connected.

"You have the greatest library in the history of the universe in your head right now. You have the skills to manipulate your body as R'thugh'cruan could. Likewise, the knowledge to be able to summon Cthulhu. In the future, you will be able to consult with your other selves, too, with meditation and dream-walking. All of that matters less now than your ability to go after the ones above. Can you do that?"

I made a pact with R'thugh'cruan in my head. The two of us merged our minds and consciousness to hold back the tide of the others. Between us, we were so similar that there was little change. Well, one small change. I now felt the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth were my family every bit as much as humanity and vowed to find them a homeworld where they could escape the eternal madness of Yog-Sothoth's realm, be it Earth or otherwise. I also possessed an all-consuming need to mate, which made me wonder if the Kastro'vaal had ever heard of restraint.

"Yes," I answered him. "I am."

"Then go," Marcus said, pointing up to the sky.

I transformed into the shape of a byakhee and found myself carried up by unnatural winds through the air, through countless worlds. Doctor Ward's journal entered a secondary stomach I conjured until the time I needed it again. My insect-meets-chiropteran form felt as natural as my human one as I flew higher and higher toward the tower's apex.

Along the way, I felt the presence of the Unimaginable Horror peeking in. Denied its daily diet of souls, the Tower of Zhaal was no longer holding Oroarchan back. The Great Old One devoured spell after spell of the Yithians, growing stronger and more "real" with each passing second.

As a byakhee, I was telepathic; I could sense the consciousness of the being. I'd imagined the Great Old Ones to be deific beings far removed from the mortal concerns of men. The thoughts they pondered were, in my head, the kind of questions that took all of human civilization ages to answer.

The Unimaginable Horror thought about feeding.

Its awesome mind, capable of calculating the mathematical foundations of the universe, directed its incredible intellect solely to the question of hunger. It thought about killing, feasting, devouring, rending, tearing, hurting, and growing larger so it could kill more.

There was nothing but corpulent NEED driving its actions. The Unimaginable Horror wanted to consume the whole of the universe and when it was done, it would move on to other realities so it might devour their populations. It might merely eat a few galaxies here and there before doing so, having no further desire to engage the Great Old Ones in territorial fights for dominance.

It was a scavenger.

Fuck it.

I reached the top of the Tower of Zhaal and saw a gathering of hundreds. Faceless Ones, Reanimated, humans, ghouls, Deep Ones, and other cultists were gathered there. Marcus Whateley had been underplaying the cosmopolitan nature of our foes, as the Faceless Ones merely comprised a solid majority.

The Matriarch led the ritual from the middle of an infinite-pointed star at the north end of the tower's top. She was chanting in Ancient

Stygian with a dual-serpent- headed staff around a black sun. I saw that much of her magic came from this staff and the iron ring on her finger, both items having once belonged to powerful wizards of ancient times.

Mercury, August, and several other prisoners were in the center of the tower's top, bound in rope inside a mystical circle. Most of the prisoners had already been killed by Faceless Ones wielding knives, letting their blood drain out onto the tower. Given how much magical energy I felt being channeled through the Matriarch, it was a ridiculous extravagance and a pointless waste of life.

Then again, so was what I was about to do.

Landing on the edge of the tower's summit, I transformed back into John Henry Booth. I was not him anymore, though, or at least not him alone. Transforming my arms into whip-like tendrils that could heat themselves to the temperature of the surface of the sun, I screamed in an alien language before swinging them around. Bodies were bisected, decapitated, and incinerated as they danced around the prisoners.

The Faceless Ones screamed and went for weapons, but I deformed my mouth to something hideous and breathed out white-hot flames that caught sixteen of them on fire. A few died instantly, but most of them ran around screaming, falling off the edge or to the ground where they perished in agony.

The Faceless One Matriarch, to her credit, did not attempt to gloat or intimidate me. Instead, she just turned the awesome power of her mystical artifacts against me. She drained the mystical circle imprisoning August and Mercury for extra energy before blasting me with a fiery spell designed to kill me.

Oh the agony!

I fell to my knees, my flesh incinerated only to regenerate and be burned again. The Matriarch killed prisoner after prisoner via her mystical draining, and would have killed August as well as Mercury if not for the fact that they'd somehow freed themselves in the meantime. Both erected a shield around themselves to prevent their deaths.

“Go to the hell that awaits you!” I snarled, my voice guttural and inhuman.

“There is no hell but this world!” the Matriarch cried out, intensifying the spell. The pain became so great, I felt like I was dying.

Which I was.

Mercury then chanted an invocation to Great Cthulhu and summoned power that was like a supernova to witness. The Faceless One Matriarch’s star-like shield vanished in an instant, causing her to stumble backward. Mercury grabbed a Desert Eagle from the holster of a Reanimated corpse on the ground, aimed, and shot the Matriarch three times in the face.

The Matriarch fell backward to her doom, her body disappearing over the tower’s edge. Given the Tower of Zhaal’s peculiar physics, it was quite possible her body would fall forever. Either that or it would be eventually scoured by winds into nothingness.

“Good job,” I said, never more proud of Mercury.

There were about thirty remaining cultists, terrified and cowering individuals unwilling to fight for their lives. I was spared from having to deal with them by August stretching out his hands and tearing their lives from their bodies, drinking their power to feed his own.

I was glad he was on our side.

“Clever, girl,” August said, staring. “I never would have been able to dispel her barrier.”

“It turns out my magic works better when I’m pissed off,” Mercury said, looking over the tower’s edge. “John, you’re alive.”

“Yes,” I said, turning around to claw out Doctor Ward’s book from my chest. The wound sealed over completely and I returned to a completely human form. My clothes were also there, false creations of my body’s ability to mimic fabric through shed skin. It was sickening as well as amazing.

The book was undamaged by the stomach acid or whatever was inside a byakhee, perhaps because of spells woven into the lining. This was going to be a hard sell. Turning around, hoping I looked human, I said, “We have to summon Cthulhu.”

Mercury and August just looked at me.

The tower shook. Oroarchan was about to escape.

Mercury said, “Shit.”

August reached out his hand. “What the hell. I always wanted to go out with a bang.”

Huh, that was easier than I expected.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Like the breaking of a dam, I felt the barriers erected by the Yithians shatter on the Tower of Zhaal and the Unimaginable Horror come forth like a tsunami into this world. All throughout the tower, blackish, foul water carrying *something vile* poured out onto the desert around us.

Like the Biblical Flood, there was a terrible sense of purpose to this water, and it moved in disturbing, animated ways, grabbing Faceless Ones from the sides of the tower and dragging them screaming into its shadowy depths. At the top of the tower, surrounded by the dead, we were ignored by it for the time being, even as I could see into its horrid depths and comprehend the true dreadful majesty of its malevolence.

The Unimaginable Horror was more than just a corruption, a living ocean of foulness. As more and more water poured out, I could see the guiding spirit animating the liquid and shuddered instinctively. It was an energy field, a presence, and a matter all at once—a strange color that existed nowhere in the human visual spectrum and was just as strange to that of a Kastro'vaal.

The Unimaginable Horror was like a gigantic hand of a three-dimensional being reaching into a two-dimensional world, stretching itself outward. A sick, mad part of my mind was grateful to realize there was no way to comprehend the totality of its terribleness. It showed me that, even in my newfound alien state, there were still mysteries too nightmarish to comprehend. Even a species as close to the Great Old Ones as the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth was nothing more than another rung on a perverse mockery of Jacob's Ladder, descending ever deeper down a tunnel of madness. The Unimaginable Horror was the unnatural disaster that would end all life on this Earth and perhaps destroy the universe someday. It had helped create all life on this planet for the purposes of devouring it, and tonight was the night of its harvest.

It was a god. The universe did not care about mortals, their problems or fears. The universe did not care about gods either,

though. For as a bleak and pitiless as this world we lived in was, there was a cold comfort knowing that it favored everyone equally. Great Old One or insect, one could manipulate the natural forces guiding the universe, but they did not offer an ounce of succor.

A thimbleful of sympathy.

In that respect, the Unimaginable Horror—no, Oroarchan—was no better or worse than us. Death might die for the Great Old Ones, and it served as no permanent prison for their kind. Yet with strange aeons (and these were *very* strange aeons), I'd seen a human and his daughter brought back to life through Nyarlathotep's own technology of the mind. The Great Old Ones, too, could be beaten and imprisoned, as the Yithians had shown. A swarm of bee stings could kill a man under the right circumstances, and it was my hope that we were that swarm.

If not, the Earth's lesser races were doomed.

"Cast the spell!" I shouted to Mercury and August. Both my companions were as mesmerized by the sight below as I was, staring at the ever-growing mass beneath us that would soon drown out the tower.

"Right!" August said, shaken by the sight and clutching Doctor Ward's book against his chest.

Mercury went to my side, cold but determined. Giving me a kiss on the lips, she looked into my eyes, shook her head and joined August in casting the spell. I did not think for a moment she'd forgiven me, but here, at the end of the world, it was an acknowledgment that there would always be love between us. Which was what made my actions cut the deepest.

Shaking my head, I took position in a triangle with August as he began to read. Mercury's magic, when added to August's, was possibly equal to that of the late Alan Ward's. I felt them draw on the deep psychic reservoirs of the race I was now a part of. They drew on my knowledge, too, using the long-dead wizards in my past to make calculations impossible for normal humans. All three of us, together, provided enough force to perform the summoning.

Even so, I don't think we would have been able to complete the spell if not for the protection provided by our insignificance. The

merest outstretch of Oroarchan godlike mind would have vaporized us. It didn't sense us, though. The being was too busy bringing itself to full power. Just watching the ever-expanding sea of nightmares made me wonder if the Great Old One would drown the world, but instead I focused on serving as a vessel for the spell being cast.

I sensed Marcus Whateley's presence join us during our enchantment, and the extra-dimensional, quantum-physics-defying being provided his own additions to the spell. Our minds became linked with his and a strange geometry filled our heads. Infinite angles, connections, and computations became as child's play among us.

Working on the spell for centuries, Alan Ward could never have succeeded any more than apes working the controls of a helicopter. Yet the man we'd been hired to kill gave us the intelligence necessary to do so.

And we did.

A black light burst from the ground beneath us, enhanced and magnified by the Tower of Zhaal below. Like a signal flare, it shot through all corners of the universe and sent a signal out to the one higher being in the cosmos we believed might reasonably care whether Oroarchan destroyed the Earth or not.

Ku'tulu.

Ku'tulu.

Ku'tulu.

The voices in my head sang of Azathoth's High Priest, the Lord of R'lyeh, and the greatest of the Great Old Ones. He (she? it?) was the exception to the rule about the universe caring about something. I felt the entirety of the cosmos warping with his arrival, as if the gods above Nyarlathotep had only been watching my struggles in anticipation for his arrival.

Oroarchan's water-based body boiled and twisted with the casting of the spell. I was fully prepared for the being to destroy us in that moment, but he did not. Oroarchan was more concerned with the flames than the animal. I didn't even know if our mad, desperate gamble was going to work. We were making a call upon Cthulhu, but there was no guarantee he'd answer. Who knew what that dreaming

god cared about now that he was awake and wandering the universe, doing whatever gods did. He might have greater concerns than the release of Oroarchan, and our desperate summoning was little more than a prayer anyway.

A prayer I was surprised to see was answered.

The arrival of Cthulhu was heralded by an impenetrable fog. It rolled forth across the ground and around us from parts unknown, blanketing our surroundings. The clouds above us became a swirling vortex of storms with lightning of a hundred different colors crisscrossing in varied directions. The moist air felt toxic due to the presence of Oroarchan in every molecule of water.

“Oh God, it’s coming,” Mercury whispered, her voice quaking with a fear I’d never heard.

“Yes,” I said, my voice every bit as terrified as hers.

August clutched Alan Ward’s book against his chest and fell to the ground, laughing as if aware of the immensity of the doom we’d brought down upon ourselves.

I caught my first glimpse of Cthulhu when the fog cloud began to part and its awful beautiful face was illuminated by lightning. I shut my eyes to any dimension but the ones visible to humans, but I couldn’t bring myself to close those, too. Looking upon Cthulhu’s terrible majesty, I felt my heart beat faster than ever. Cthulhu was, without a doubt, a mountain that walked. A mile tall if it was an inch, and that was just its projected self overlaying a much grander being that moved through reality as if it were its own universe.

I’d seen thousands of idols dedicated to Cthulhu over the decades, but none of them caught a glimmer of the true, awesome visage of Azathoth’s most perfect son. No demon, god, or monster of Earth’s mythology could approach Cthulhu’s glory. He was and forever would be.

For posterity’s sake, even if such a thing was not to be for much longer, I’ll try to describe what I saw rather than felt. Great Cthulhu, as mentioned, dwarfed all skyscrapers in his size, seeming to stand as tall as the Tower of Zhaal. Its head had three baleful black eyes on each side and was bedecked with a thousand tentacles at the base of its long, stretched-out skull.

The creature's body was a rubbery thick mass that seemed almost flabby, as if there were too much of it to be seen in the space it occupied. Yet as it stretched forth, the creature seemed to become taut and muscular like a lean predator. The creature had wings, but they were not leathery like a bat's or feathered like a bird's, but composed of the same sinew-like substance as the rest of his body.

And its presence.

Dear God, its presence!

If I were to say every cell in Great Cthulhu's body contained intelligence equal to a man and the psychic will thereof, I would sound like a lunatic—but there it was. Cthulhu was a nation unto itself, much like the shoggoths in that every part of him/it/her was alive. The destruction of humanity by the Great Old Ones' awakening was rendered morally justified by its rising, as I realized that all those who died were less than a fraction of those living inside the Prince of the Old Ones.

Worse still, I recognized the siren call of the voices inside Cthulhu as the ones inside my own head. The distant call of Azathoth's court where the Blind Idiot God was worshiped by nameless entities was matched by Great Cthulhu's own mind. For the past year, I had been unwittingly hearing the song of Cthulhu.

That was when Cthulhu spoke.

What Cthulhu said I could not say, for it was not directed to me but to Oroarchan. Like being struck by the heat of a nuclear bomb, one couldn't be even the least bit psychic and fail to be overwhelmed by his words.

"Ah!" Mercury screamed, tears running down her face while she clutched her head.

"Please!" August tried to tear out his own eyes, dropping the journal, only for him to collapse before his hands reached his face.

I just stood there, frozen in place. I felt Nyarlathotep's terrible presence reach into my mind then and force all of my extra senses open. I was forced to watch the conflict between Cthulhu and the Unimaginable Horror in its full, terrible glory. There were things I did not witness, thank all that is holy, but what I did see would haunt me through this life and every one thereafter.

I saw the Oroarchan reach with its aluminiferous tendrils to the distant world of Xash, where it was worshiped by the world's degenerate, once-civilized people. Every being of every age was killed to provide Oroarchan the strength to grapple mentally with Cthulhu. Cthulhu responded by ripping out the corona of a distant star and hurling at it at the heart of Oroarchan in another layer of reality. The only reason all life on Earth wasn't instantly destroyed by the opening salvos of their battle was because it was being fought on an entirely higher order of the Multiverse.

Yet to say this battle did not affect the Earth would have been lying. Children were born without eyes, volcanos erupted in the sea as well as long-lost mountain ranges, earthquakes toppled cities, and whole swaths of the Tunneler race died off. I'd invited the Devil to sit down at our table and the consequences were not easily dismissed.

In a terrible moment, I wondered if this fight would last for aeons, destroying much of the universe before finally being settled. After all, I had no idea how long it had taken Cthulhu to defeat Oroarchan during their first battle, and that had been waged with many Great Old Ones against one. This might even prove to be worse than letting Oroarchan go free, because the being was a plague on the universe, but it killed slowly.

Almost as soon as it had begun, the fight was over. The sea of living water collapsed into a gigantic lake of inanimate fluid. Cthulhu had triumphed over its opponent, though it did not seem triumphant. Pointless as it was to read emotions into a being that wasn't even physically there, I thought the most powerful of the Great Old Ones seemed weary.

The fog proceeded to produce four more shadowy figures. They were Great Old Ones of the same substance and species as Cthulhu, reminding me that the inhabitants of ancient R'lyeh hadn't been Cthulhu alone, but his entire race. I fancied these to be Cthulhu's sons and daughters, though I admit this to be nothing more than a fancy on my part. The five Great Old Ones moved to form a pentagram-like position around the Tower of Zhaal, which compelled me to grab both Mercury as well as August. Marcus was

nowhere to be found, and he could move anywhere he wanted anyway.

Both Mercury and August were limp, comatose figures in my arms, but knowing the alternative was to be subject to whatever these terrible beings were planning, I leapt over the side of the tower with them both before transforming into a winged creature similar to a byakhee. I settled on a distant desert patch where the edges of Oroarchan's form had created an artificial beach. There, I looked back to see the five Great Old Ones work perilous magic upon the Tower of Zhaal.

The Yithians' own advanced work and sorcery was cast aside, to be replaced with something far sturdier. The *Re'Kithnid*'s claims of benevolent Great Old Ones now seemed far less insane. I saw the Tower of Zhaal vanish into the mists, once more leaving this reality, and hoped it would never be seen again upon this Earth. The four Great Old Ones that had accompanied Cthulhu also disappeared, returning to whatever distant parts of the universe or dimensions they hailed from.

Cthulhu himself remained. The rugose horror lifted its flabby claws into the air and the ocean at my feet slowly rose into the sky before spreading around the planet. The waters that had comprised their foe's body transformed into rain across the planet, and where its droplets fell, strange new mutant plant life grew. Humanity might perish over the next few decades, but through this act of divine providence, the Earth would recover and produce new life in future centuries.

I stood in awe.

That was when I felt Great Cthulhu's gaze turn upon me, and there was a single moment where I felt the entire universe's attention.

Cthulhu spoke, its psychic presence translating to English. "*I know you*."

With that, Cthulhu vanished as well.

And the world was silent.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The fog receded from the tower where the Unimaginable Horror had been kept. The Horror was buried now, returned to the recesses of the cosmos, and now marked with spells that would keep it imprisoned for the next hundred million years.

I suspected Great Cthulhu's spellcasting would prove far more formidable than the Yithians', and we would not encounter Oroarchan again in humanity's racial lifetime. Still, I did not feel triumphant. Sitting there, surrounded by the dust and destruction, all I could do was weep like a child. Mercury was cradled on my lap, her eyes vacant as she stared up into the sky. There was no hint of consciousness in them. Mercury had looked into the eyes of the abyss and the abyss had pulled her into its yawning depths. My lover was catatonic, hopelessly so, the result of her psychic sensitivity making her vulnerable to the backlash of the two Great Old Ones' battle.

August sat off to the side, equally broken by the experience, his arms folded around his legs as he giggled. His mind was shattered, torn to shreds in a different but still devastating way. I spared him not a moment of grief, for my heart was too full of Mercury's absence, but August's seemed a poor reward for his heroism this day. I could not imagine a worse fate for the proud man than to be condemned to live as a shell of his former self.

My only comfort, if it might be called such, was that neither party would be able to survive long in their sorry state. The Wasteland was a harsh mistress and would claim them, as it did all humans. If I'd had a gun, I would have put it to my head and pulled the trigger. The weight of this dreadful week was too much for me. I'd vowed to live, no matter what, but that promise seemed to be an empty distant memory. I did this, in part, for Mercury's sake, and her absence from my life in spirit, if not body, was too much to take. Even if she could never accept me for what I was, I loved her and always would.

So I just held her tightly.

“Thankfully, John, this is not that kind of story,” Marcus’s voice spoke nearby, and my attention turned to him.

The nine-foot-tall academic was standing there with his arms folded over a bronze Cthulhu-idol-tipped cane. He was looking amused, which infuriated me.

“You,” I said, spitting, my nose running and my eyes red with tears. “Haven’t you wreaked enough havoc? You’ve cost me everything.”

“The universe is a tale of cosmic horror,” Marcus said, walking toward me and sitting down on one knee. “It is a place of pitiless gods, endless monsters, and an environment as stark as any hell dreamed of by theologians. There is no release from this fundamental truism that nothing we do in such a place matters.”

I stared at him, broken in mind as well as spirit.

Marcus then raised his forefinger as if to shush a child. “So, that means all that matters is what we do.”

He reached over and placed his hand on Mercury’s forehead. Her eyes gradually cleared and awareness returned to them. She seemed confused, opened her mouth, tried to say something, and fell asleep.

I stared at her and then looked up at Marcus, tears falling down my face. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it,” Marcus said, getting up to do the same to August. “It would, perhaps, be a kinder thing to slit her throat and then yours. However, it is the nature of humans to fight against death. By mistake, accident, or design—you are a most wonderful species.”

“I am not human,” I said, admitting what I’d been in denial of this entire time.

“You are whatever you choose to define yourself as. Only you can say who and what you are. That is a truism of all life everywhere.”

“It is perhaps not so bad a thing to be an alien,” I said, looking out into the darkness and gently placing Mercury on the ground. “A century ago, Cthulhu destroyed the Earth. A few minutes ago, he saved it.”

“He’s a funny little squid-dragon. If you think about it, he’s every bit as irrelevant as we are, but fights against a universe that seeks to make him so.”

“I suppose he is.” I let out a bitter chuckle. “What’s going to happen now?”

“Life will go on. The Unimaginable Horror is dead, but sleeping as before. It is linked to every being on Earth with water in its veins, however. Through that connection, it will continue to influence life, and will bring back the dead in the hope of restoring itself. Such an endeavor will take aeons, though. The Faceless Ones who worshiped Oroarchan are all dead, and so are many of its Reanimated pawns. Only the ones here, though. It has many more spread around the Earth.”

“Not much of a victory then.” It was as I expected.

“That depends on how you measure such things. You should be proud, John. In more than half of the universes where events came to this climax, the races of Earth were saved and the Unimaginable Horror was contained. It is quite vexed about this.”

Marcus was, of course, speaking of the fact this was a conflict playing out across multiple parallel realities. I couldn’t forget waking up next to my own corpse and being told that I’d been shuffled to a dimension almost identical to my previous one—and the one I’d left behind was now destroyed.

It didn’t surprise me in the slightest to find out this conflict wasn’t limited to two such dimensions. I wondered how many Marcus Whateleys and how many John Henry Booths fought against the Unimaginable Horror. Twenty? A hundred? A trillion? Did it matter? The very existence of other realities made me question my identity as a unique being. Then again, I suppose it didn’t matter as long as we’d won. We’d witnessed a high noon duel between Cthulhu and Oroarchan, and the first of the Great Old Ones was the fastest gun in the New East. That was a reality worth living in.

Sort of.

“Wait. Only half?” I asked, staring. “You’ll forgive me if I find the kind of large-scale planetary genocide you’re describing less than comforting.”

Marcus closed his eyes and lowered his head. “People want stories where good triumphs over evil and there are no costs. I do not believe in such things. Instead, I think survival is its own reward. Where life finds a way, there is hope, and you should take comfort in that alone. Your doppelgängers on other worlds do.”

“I am not them.”

Marcus opened his eyes. “No, I suppose not.”

“Do you have any plans now?” It was a strange question to answer what amounted to Marcus Whateley’s ghost, but I didn’t know if he believed he would go off to some brightly lit heaven or sink into oblivion.

Marcus had an answer, though, at least for himself. “I intend to join my ancestor, Yog-Sothoth, in his dimension. While my knowledge of quantum mechanics and applied hyper-mathematics allowed me to cheat death for a time, I am no longer a part of this world. Does R’thugh’cruan wish me to convey the Eyes of Yog-Sothoth a message?”

I looked down. It was difficult to think of them as my people now but I strangely did. I was both human and Kastro’vaal. I wanted both races to survive, as unlikely as such a thing was. “I’d love for you to convey my sadness at their plight and hope they find some measure of peace eventually.”

There was no point in being angry about my situation anymore. I was something other than human now, and denial would serve no purpose. The powers I’d gain from my transformation into an Eye of Yog-Sothoth had saved lives, perhaps the world. R’thugh’cruan was the reason I hadn’t had my mind blasted to dust by watching the battle between Cthulhu and Oroarchan. R’thugh’cruan and I were beings alike. We lusted for battle, war, mates, pleasure, and family. Perhaps there was something to Marcus’s statement that we were all a little bit human.

“A very mature response,” Marcus said, smiling. “Farewell, John. I’m sure you’ll be able to work it out with Mercury in the end. Saving the world has to have won points with her. Life is too short to carry grudges over who is a monster and who isn’t.”

“Clearly, you don’t know Mercury.” I had faith we would be together, though. Whether I was human or not.

“I admit to never having feelings for the opposite sex that way, or for any being in such a manner. Asexuality has proven a significant time-saver.”

A sudden grip of panic seized my chest and I found it difficult to breathe. There were questions I needed answers to. Ones Marcus may or may not possess insight into, but which I had little to lose by asking.

“Before you go,” I started to say, “I’d like to ask you something. Your peculiar relationship with time allows you to see the future, right?”

Marcus seemed uncomfortable and frowned. “To some extent. The future is a matter of perception. It’s an infinite number of roads, the others becoming invisible once you start walking down a path. They’re still there, waiting for you to take a turn onto them.”

The present was bad enough, as was everything which had led up to it. The quest to bind the Unimaginable Horror had been a struggle with terrible consequences. Jessica was dead and I wasn’t sure if there was any cure for that, even in this insane world. Other members of my group had died horribly fighting against the Unimaginable Horror. Thom, Bobbie, and Mathew all deserved better than they’d gotten. But didn’t we all? Hell, I wasn’t sure Bobbie was actually dead since she’d recovered from terrible wounds before. I would have to rescue Jackie from the University since I didn’t think they would honor any deals now that the Unimaginable Horror was dealt with. All of that I could deal with, though. I just had one question. “Do I destroy humanity to resurrect the Kastro’vaal race? Is there truly no hope for mankind? Am I to be the instrument of one of my races’ end?”

Marcus burst out laughing.

I narrowed my gaze. “I find this to be no laughing matter.”

Marcus stopped laughing before giving a light snort. “No, you wouldn’t, would you? Nyarlathotep has a way of getting into the minds of beings. He thinks he expands their consciousness, but more often fries them like eggs.”

I stared at him blankly.

Marcus sighed, his voice wistful. “John, do you have children?”

“Yes.” I wondered why people kept asking me that.

“You will have more. Jackie, Anita, and your son Gabriel will also breed. The essence of the Kastro’vaal race is inside you. Whether through your adopted offspring or those of blood. Humanity will go extinct, but its descendants will carry on its legacy.” Marcus conjured the Death card from the Tarot deck between his fingers like a magician.

“Can it be that simple?” I asked, not daring to hope.

“No, but we can pretend it is,” Marcus said. “Humanity may destroy itself, too, and the Kastro’vaal may be trapped forever. You may also be overwhelmed by what’s inside you as the Kastro’vaal were a lusty, conquest-minded race who forced countless races to serve them as slaves and concubines. You may be a worse monster as a human than you ever were as a hybrid. Reality is flexible that way. Still, it’s a perfectly good planet. Why waste it?”

“The planet is a little beaten up. I’d hesitate to call it perfectly good.”

“Bah!” Marcus said. “Just a few dents here and there. Nothing that can’t be banged out. In any case, I must leave. I promised I would return to the Insmaw, and I will, but after that, I am leaving this world. I am dead, after all, and that requires certain appointments. Wilbur deserves his freedom as well.”

“Thank you. I wish you well on your trip to the undiscovered country.”

“Death is not undiscovered. It’s a road well-traveled. *Adios*, pardner.” Marcus vanished into the ether without saying another word. One moment he was there, the next minute he wasn’t.

I blinked, realizing I hadn’t asked about how to avert humanity’s destruction in three generations. I doubted Marcus would have given me a straight answer, but it bothered me that I’d been so wrapped up in myself I’d not asked.

In the end, the future was uncertain but perhaps that’s how it was meant to be. I turned back to Mercury and August. She was awake now, climbing to her feet and looking bewildered. August was

yawning. We were far away from civilization, trapped in the middle of the desert, with no supplies or vehicles. I wasn't worried, though. We'd survived much worse, and I was a little more comfortable using my "unnatural" abilities to help us. We would survive and that was enough.